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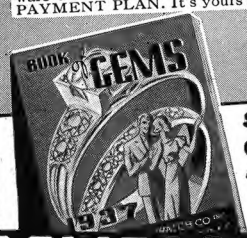

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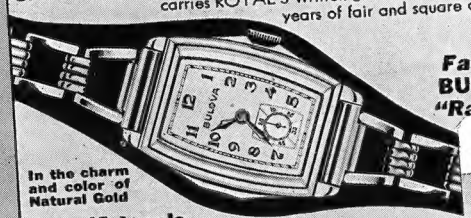

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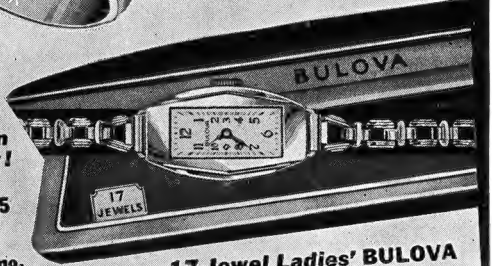

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HORROR STORIES

Volume Five August-September, 1937 Number Four

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Beast-Women Stalk At Night.....*By Wayne Rogers* 6

Helpless against his own wife's vicious attack, Gordan Thayer saw her race away, wild-eyed and snarling, to join the cat-women of Windover—a mad female band who feasted on the warm blood of the town's young men!

THREE EERIE HORROR NOVELETTES

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Though I knew that the blood of beautiful Clavel Eden throbbed with an unquenchable lust, so compelling was her allure that I fled with her to those dark places where her hideous mania thrived most horribly!

Disturb Not the Dead.....*By George Edson* 72

Fighting Jim Kimball, Mayor of Fairville, could best any earthly force that threatened the town he loved, but he could not cope with the eerie corpse-things that struck at the city's fairest daughters—and left them tortured, maimed, and ravished. . . !

The Marriage Made In Hell.....*By Wyatt Blassingame* 104

Can I marry the girl who, in my soulless greed, I snatched from the threshold of happiness? Can I defy the weird, tormenting whispers that spell for me and mine a ghastly doom? . . . I intend to try!

BLOOD-CHILLING SHORT TALES OF HORROR

A Monster Seeks My Heart.....*By E. G. Morris* 35

I scorned the love of a twisted dwarf of a woman, and unknowingly turned the creature's awful wrath upon my lovely fiancée.

Venus of Laughing Death.....*By Russell Gray* 64

Roy Bishop succumbed to the charms of a beautiful phantom of sensual delight—and murdered the thing he loved!

Fresh Corpses On Consignment.....*By William G. Bogart* 92

It was grimly ironic that a mission of mercy should have led Jim Stark into a grisly shop where Hell's own butchers carved human bodies for a diabolical cause—and the girl he loved stood next-in-line!

Satan's Charm School.....*By H. T. Sperry* 118

What malignant force changed the innocent girls of that fashionable school into devotees of midnight, orgiastic rites?

—AND—

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Phrophecy—or deadly curse? . . .

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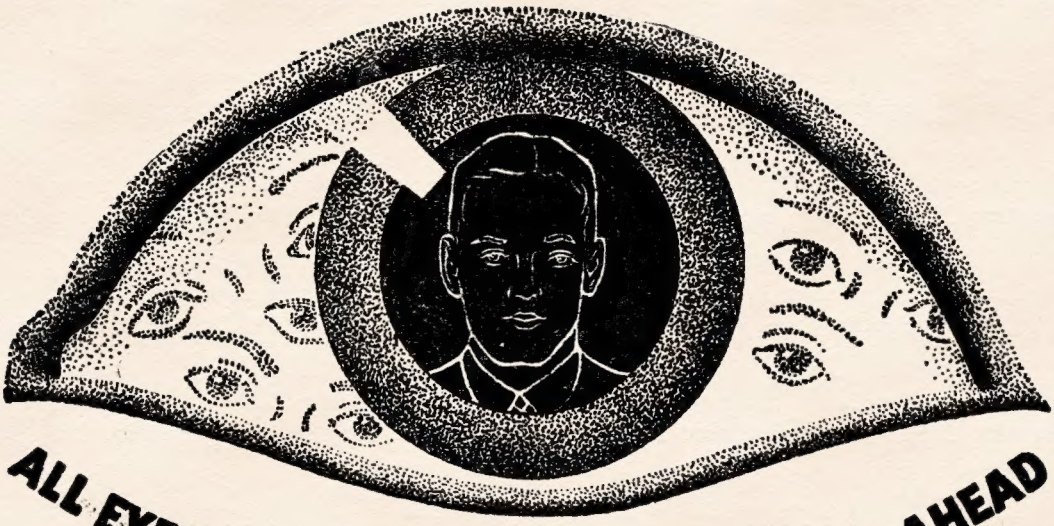

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Delve Not Too Deeply

NO ONE can deny that there are a few people who give all manifestations of being what we refer to as "psychic." And among the so-called psychics we have found several who have exercised this power, or gift—as some call it—to their ultimate terror. For there is such a thing as delving too deeply into the realms of the supernatural. . . . We are thinking of a person we knew not many years ago. We will call her Olivia X, for she is still alive, though she is no longer the beautiful woman she once was.

In the fashionable set in which Olivia moved her clairvoyance was always a source of considerable amusement.

She took it lightly at first, but soon it began to impress people seriously, and when some of her amazing predictions came true, she felt a strange sense of power. With it grew an intense displeasure of being ridiculed—even in fun.

One evening at a cocktail party she advised a guest to make certain changes in his business plans. Her fiancé, a famous airplane pilot, overheard her—and laughingly scoffed. Olivia was infuriated. She hurled vituperous words at the man she loved, told him she would soon prove her ability . . . but it wouldn't matter to him because he would be dead. Another person would be involved—who it was, was not quite clear to her. . . .

Olivia was with the crowd at the field to watch her intended husband take off for a continental speed dash. She and a battery of cameramen were at the far end of the runway near the point where the ship was to leave the ground. Her face showed a look of fear, for a strong feeling of impending disaster was upon her. . . . Then she heard the deep-throated snarl of eight hundred horse-power as the huge plane hurtled down the runway. Now she could see the figure in the cockpit, could see her lover wave. She raised her hand, too— and flung it across her eyes to shut out the sight of what she knew would happen; the great monoplane had suddenly swerved, was plunging straight at the crowd—and at her. . . .

When the dust cleared away it was found that, miraculously, only one person was killed —the pilot. Mechanics cut into the mass of twisted metal. . . . A man's voice called out excitedly, "Hey, Joe! There *is* some one else here . . . gimme a hand. . . ." The limp, blood-smeared body of a woman was removed from beneath the wreckage. It was Olivia X, and she still breathed. . . .

Olivia lives in a small cottage by the seashore. She seeks no companionship for she is hideously maimed, crippled. She does not dabble with things psychic for she knows not whether she merely predicted the awful catastrophe—or uttered the words that *caused it*, like a curse on wrathful lips. If the latter were true, was this her punishment? . . .

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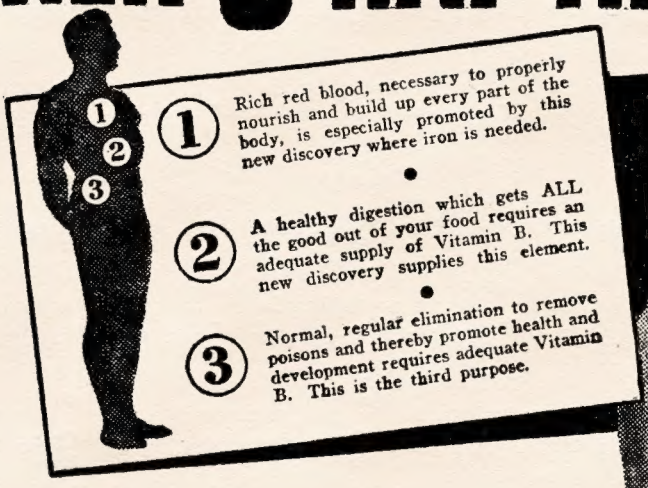
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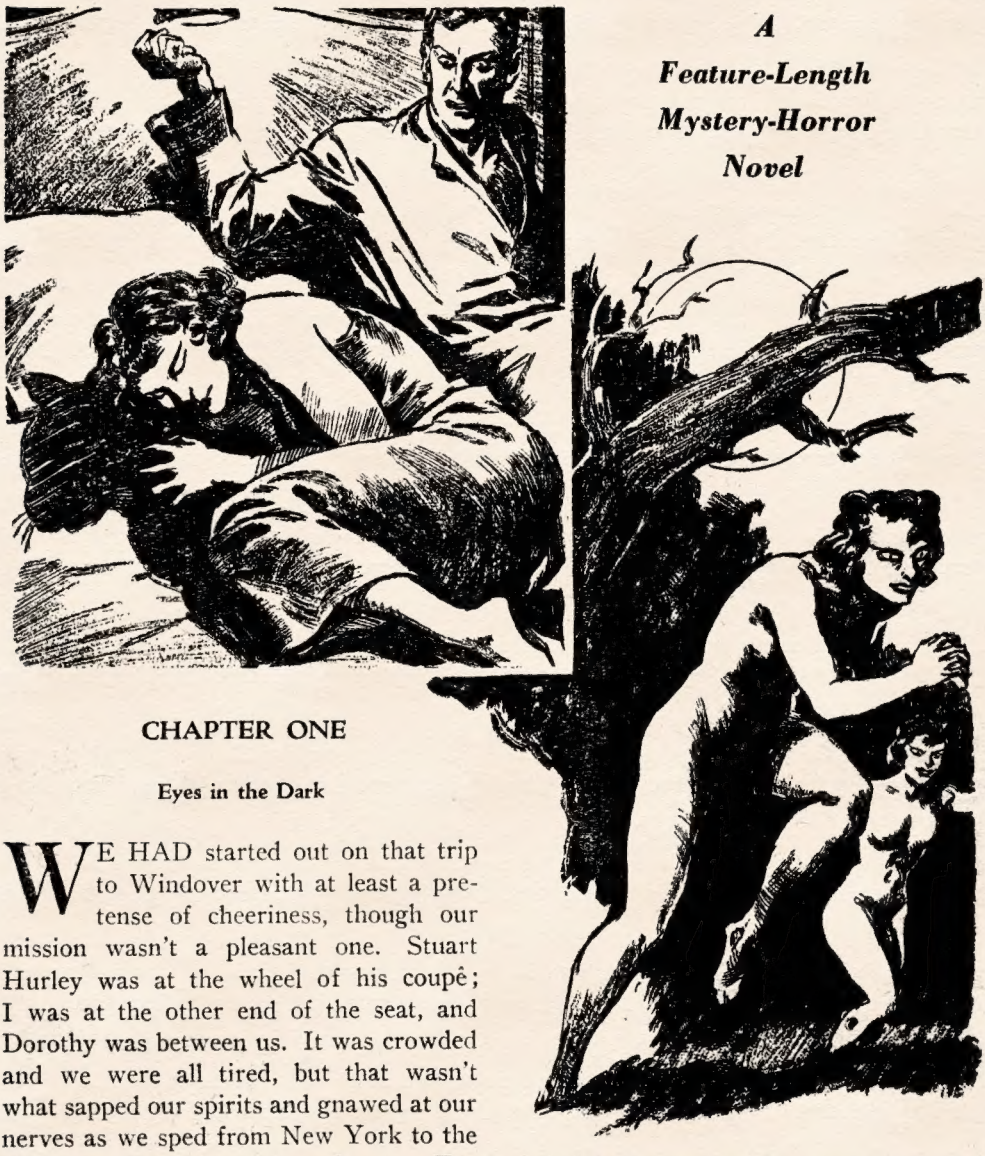

CHAPTER ONE

Eyes in the Dark

WE HAD started out on that trip to Windover with at least a pretense of cheeriness, though our mission wasn't a pleasant one. Stuart Hurley was at the wheel of his coupé; I was at the other end of the seat, and Dorothy was between us. It was crowded and we were all tired, but that wasn't what sapped our spirits and gnawed at our nerves as we sped from New York to the little town in western Massachusetts. For now we were depressed, grim.

In the mind of each of us, I knew, the memory of the tragedy which lay behind our embarking on this trip was becoming more and more vivid as we drew nearer to the sanitarium where my wife's sister Mildred was confined. The next day was Mildred's birthday; that was why we had come—because Dorothy wanted to see her. Stuart Hurley had insisted on being included in the party the moment he heard of it.

The thing that had happened to Mildred was terrible enough even to me, her brother-in-law. To Dorothy it was appalling—and something more. Ever since it had happened I had noticed a shadow of fear in her eyes; an unspoken terror to which she did not dare give voice, but which I detected and understood. Dorothy and Mildred were sisters; if such a

STALK AT NIGHT

By Wayne Rogers

(Author of "Satan's Corpse Factory", etc.)

Gordon Thayer shrank back in mortal terror as his lovely bride assumed the beastial characteristics of a jungle cat. Then, helpless against her furious attack, he saw her race away, wild-eyed and snarling, to join the cat-women of Windover—a vicious band who feasted on the warm blood of the town's young men!

thing could happen to Mildred's brain, might it not be possible that the blood taint would go farther — that Dorothy, too, would some day feel its weird manifestations working within her . . . ?

Cause enough there to make the two of us tense and silent as Windover drew near; but to Stuart Hurley I knew the approaching meeting must be even more of a strain. Stuart had been in love with Mildred for years; loved her before she married Earl Richmand, and had stood by her through all the trouble that had come to her since that unfortunate day. To visit the woman he loved who was in Mildred's condition must wring the heart of any man.

Perhaps that was why Stuart was leaning closer to the wheel, was peering more intently into the headlight-illuminated darkness ahead of us. Perhaps that was why he reacted so swiftly to that sudden moment of horror. His foot jammed down on the brakes and he froze like a statue behind the windshield as we swung around a turn in the road and the night stillness was suddenly rent by an eerie howl of utter agony. It was followed by a shrill screech—a screech that was almost human, yet had an animal tone that was unmistakable.

I had heard a cougar scream like that once, and the blood-curdling sound had seemed to flow in through my ears and penetrate every part of my body, right down into the marrow of my bones . . . .

For a split-second there was a flash of something there in the bright arc of the headlights; just a glimpse of a tawny form that darted into the bushes—but even that brief view sent a twinge of nameless terror coursing down my spine. My eyes darted toward Stuart—and he put into words the frightful thought that I was trying to deny.

"That was a human being," he said hoarsely through tight lips. "A woman—I saw her! God!"

Dorothy had stiffened at my side, but his words seemed to release her, to reduce her to a state of trembling terror as she clung to me.

"It couldn't have been," I snapped. "No human could howl like that. Probably some sort of wildcat that looked fantastic to us when we came upon it suddenly this way."

We didn't have to get out of the car to see what was left there in the road; the headlights revealed all too plainly the mangled body of a large dog. But as we approached it we saw that it had been literally torn to pieces. Its throat had been ripped out and its fur was bloody. It had been disemboweled, as if great claws had raked it from end to end.

Dorothy stared down at the grisly sight with eyes that fairly bulged from her head—fascinated eyes that refused to leave the mangled horror. Her lips were moving, but no sound came from them—no sound until I distinguished the whispered name of her sister.

"There, look at those marks." I pointed to tracks at the side of the road. "An animal's paws made those tracks. The creature was a wild-cat or a lynx."

Dorothy's eyes hardly glanced at the tracks. They were riveted on the bloody heap that, a few minutes ago, had been a living dog.

"I saw her," came almost soundlessly from her lips. "It was a woman, Gordon. Oh, God—if it was Mildred—"

"Of course, it wasn't," Stuart now joined me. "We were all mistaken, Dorothy. These footprints prove it. We've all been thinking too much about Mildred, that's the trouble. We're letting it get on our nerves—letting it make us see things."

But as we got back into the car all three of us were shaken and unconvinced. I could not swear to what I had seen—but the memory rose shudderingly before me, and I was afraid to think about it. Of course, the creature couldn't have been Mildred, and yet. . . .

TWO years ago Mildred Oliphant had been a normal and very lovely young woman, ardently courted by several men. Stuart Hurley, a successful young lawyer, was one of them. Earl Richmond, son of a wealthy family, was another. For a while it seemed a toss-up which she would choose, but her family favored Richmond and, largely through the pressure they brought to bear upon her, she married him.

Stuart Hurley was heartbroken, but he accepted his defeat with good grace and remained friendly with the young couple.

Before the first year of their marriage was completed Richmond began to change, began to neglect his wife. He drank, gambled and stayed away from home for days at a time. Rapidly his conduct became worse, until it finally resulted in a separation.

Soon after that Mildred began to show queer tendencies. Little by little she withdrew into herself, became morose and secretive. Stuart Hurley did his best to cheer her, but she seemed to want to be alone; seemed to want to prowl by herself—especially at night. Twice she was caught coming back from those nocturnal walks wearing practically no clothing.

Stuart was there waiting for her the night she slipped downstairs noiselessly and started for the door—stark naked. He caught her just in time to prevent her from getting out of the house, and he had to use all his strength to hold her down as she hissed and scratched at him. We hired a nurse for her after that, but despite the utmost vigilance Mildred eluded her time and again.

"She has the cunning of an animal," the white-faced nurse reported. "She can move as stealthily as a cat—and sometimes she looks at me as if she *is* a cat—as if she is going to spring at my throat."

A cat—that was it. More and more Mildred's habits were becoming feline. Old legends of lycanthropy ran through my brain as I watched her; she was like a person bewitched, a person possessed of a demon. A human cat, with all of a cat's habits and desires.

The night that she escaped from her room and crept up to the cage of a pet parrot told us that no ordinary nurse was sufficient protection for her. The body of that parrot was mauled and mangled so that its blood was spattered all over the room. We knew then that Mildred must be sent away.

Dr. Melvin Oliphant's sanitarium in Windover was the logical place to send her. Oliphant was her uncle and the head of the family, and was, besides, an eminent brain specialist. At one time his sanitarium had been held in high repute and was prosperous, but some fifteen years ago disaster had come down upon it when a tragic operation focused publicity upon it.

As far as I had been able to gather the story, Henrietta Dunham, a pretty young woman from the village, was being treated at the sanitarium when an unauthorized operation was performed on her brain—an operation that failed and left her an incurable maniac. The newspapers featured her as a human guinea pig who had been the victim of a cold-blooded experiment. In the prosecution that followed, Walter Conklin, one of Dr. Oliphant's assistants, had been convicted and sent to prison for life. Oliphant barely escaped punishment himself, but his reputation was irreparably damaged and his practice was ruined. The sanitarium never recovered from the adverse publicity that had deluged it; and with it went the prosperity that had once been Windover's.

Yet the little town had never been as silent and deserted looking at it was when we drove into it and passed down the main street. Nowhere was there a soul to be seen, and most of the houses were dark. Only here and there a narrow slit of light served to prove that the place wasn't abandoned entirely.

"Cheerful looking burg, isn't it?" Stuart Hurley growled as he glanced up and down the deserted streets. "Looks like a ghost town. They seem to turn in mighty early back here in the hills."

But even as he said it, I knew that he was adding the last few words for Dorothy's benefit. We had been there at night before, often much later than this, and had never found the village so empty of all signs of life. This wasn't natural; there was something weird and uncanny about it—something that reached out and

took hold of our imaginations and gripped them fearsomely. . . .

AT THE far end of the main street, perched on the crest of a slight hill that dominated the village, was the large, rambling stone building that was Dr. Oliphant's sanitarium. At best, that place was depressing looking. Its architecture was abominable, and the grey stone of which it was constructed was cheerless and forbidding.

Now it loomed up out of the darkness like a grim prison—a fitting habitat for the lost souls who were confined there.

All was quiet as the tomb, and the slight squeal of our brakes seemed earshattering as we came to a halt. Dorothy's fingers were icy cold in my hand as I helped her out and started up the steps with her. Almost immediately Oliphant himself answered our ring—so promptly, in fact, that it seemed he must have been perched behind the door, waiting for our arrival.

Melvin Oliphant was a man of more than average height, a man whose shoulders were slightly hunched as if from long years of peering through microscopes. His head was bald on top and fringed with grey hair, his features sharp, dark eyes peering out from beneath his shaggy grey brows.

It was those eyes which caught my attention the moment we stepped into the large room that served as his office. They were anxious, troubled eyes; eyes that darted from one to another of us as if he were fearful lest we discover something that he was desperately anxious to hide from us.

"You can't see her tonight, I'm afraid," he announced almost before we had had time to catch our breaths. "She's sleeping now—had rather a bad day. I don't want to risk disturbing her."

"But, Uncle Mel, she's all right?" Dorothy asked anxiously. "She—she isn't any worse? She's safe here in the building? A little while ago we saw—we thought—"

"Yes, yes, quite all right," Oliphant nodded his head vigorously and stood up as if to herd us out of the door. "Tomorrow, I hope—"

But there I took a hand and pushed him back into his chair while I told him what we had seen on the road. Oliphant's face, I noticed, became whiter, became almost chalky, and his dark eyes stared at me fixedly as I talked. But then he smiled—if the grimace that came over his features could be called a smile.

"Nothing but an animal, of course," he agreed quickly. "Mildred is quite safe here. Tomorrow I hope she will be able to see you. Now. . . ."

Out of the corner of my eye, as we spoke, I had seen Oliphant's assistant, John Eskridge, come into the room. He had gone straight to Dorothy and had drawn her aside, was talking to her in a voice too low for me to hear. That was sufficient reason to spur me on my way. John Eskridge had been one of Dorothy's suitors before I married her. Perhaps that was why I had no use for him, but I told myself there was more to it than that—something about the man which I disliked, which made me distrust him.

"I'm sorry that I can't ask you to stay here," Oliphant was apologizing, "but I haven't the accommodations I once had. All of my rooms are occupied—and you'll be more comfortable at the hotel."

I knew that hotel, too; a great barn of a place that had been built in the days when Windover was booming. Now it was practically closed up. On the verge of bankruptcy for years, it was a marvel to me that it was able to keep its doors open. Not a palatial place to spend the night—but it was infinitely preferable to Dr. Oliphant's establishment with its unfortunate tenants.

I went gladly, and soon Dorothy and I

were registered and ushered into a large second-floor bedroom, while Stuart Hurley was escorted to another farther down the hall. The day had been wearisome, nerve-taxing, and the big four-poster bed looked good, but I was too tired to get undressed immediately. Instead, I sprawled in a wide armchair and watched Dorothy as she prepared to retire.

SHE was a sight for tired eyes. We had been married a little more than six months, and I was more overwhelmingly in love with her than on the day she became mine.

Dorothy was beautiful, with clear-cut cameo features that sometimes took my breath away with their loveliness. Her body was a thing of slim perfection, yet molded so exquisitely that her slenderness deprived her of no whit of feminine lure. My pulses beat faster as I watched her slip out of her clothing—as she unhooked her brassiere and wriggled out of her step-ins, to stand there for a moment in glorious nudity as she reached for her nightgown.

"Mrs. Thayer, you are a very lovely creature," came almost reverently from my lips as my eyes worshipped her.

"I'm glad you like me, darling," she smiled, and for a moment more she held the nightgown aside so that I might drink my fill—and in that instant the hair at the back of my neck seemed to rise and stand on end; in that instant I knew that my eyes were not the only ones reveling in this intimate display!

There at the dark window, when I whirled toward it, was another pair of eyes—eager, avid, profaning eyes in a whiskery, gaping mouthed face! Eyes that were gleaming with lust!

I leaped from my chair and sprang across the room, flung wider the already open window and lunged out onto the balcony. Before the peeper had time to turn and bolt my fingers fastened in the collar of his coat and I dragged him, whining and wriggling, back into the room. Desperately he flung himself at me, swinging his fists wildly, but I slapped his harmless blows out of the way and sent him staggering across the room with a smash to the jaw.

Only then did I discover his identity. He was Ira Dunham, the old fellow who served as porter and handyman around the hotel, a strong man despite his years. Dorothy had slipped into her negligee by now, but the thought of this fellow's obscene eyes feasting upon her nakedness filled me with rage. Relentlessly I followed him across the room and gave him the punishment he deserved.

"Next time you're tempted to play Peeping Tom maybe you'll remember this," I panted as I belabored him.

The fellow's beady, rat-like eyes glared at me and nasty curses spat from his lips as he tried to cringe away and protect himself.

"You kin do this to me now," he snarled, "but my turn'll come. You'll sing a different tune when her fine body is any man's to look at! You think you're lucky, don't ye? Well, maybe you'll change yer mind when she uses them charms o' hers to drag men to their deaths—"

"Ira!" a voice bellowed at the door. "What are you doing in there? Shut your mouth and open this door."

It was Ross Morgan, the elderly hotel owner. He came into the room the moment I unlocked and opened the door, and after him came a middle-aged man whom he introduced as Ed Sprague, the deputy sheriff.

"We heard the noise up here and come running," he explained, as he turned to glower at Ira Dunham. "Peeping in windows, heh? It's too bad Mr. Thayer didn't beat the head off you like you deserve. The fact that you ain't got much more sense than that daughter of yours is the

only reason I don't have Ed pack you off to jail."

"He'll pay—he'll pay—sooner'n he has any idea," old Ira was sniveling, but Morgan's glaring eyes seemed to shrivel him, to dry up the threats on his lips.

And as I watched that tense drama I sensed that there was more behind it than appeared on the surface. Ross Morgan, for some reason, was terrified. Stark fear leaped in his eyes and he was desperately anxious to close old Dunham's mouth. Only Ed Sprague seemed at a loss to understand what was going on—but even he became transfixed, an ashen-faced embodiment of utter terror, when a fearful howl of agony pealed out on the street somewhere beyond the hotel. A fearful howl that was echoed by the piercing scream of a great cat leaping in to the kill!

CHAPTER TWO

Terror Town

ROSS MORGAN became a thing of quaking terror as that scream keened into his ears. Helplessly he stood there, staring out of the open window as if he expected to see the Devil himself come vaulting through. Morgan and Sprague were both speechless with terror—only old Ira Dunham seemed unafraid; and he was grinning, grinning fiendishly, malevolently, as he turned his ratty eyes on me.

"What in God's name was that?" Stuart Hurley suddenly appeared in the doorway, his dressing gown hastily thrown over his pajamas. "What—what the devil's going on here, Gordon?"

That seemed to bring Ed Sprague to his senses. With an unintelligible snort he turned and raced out of the room, but Ross Morgan still stood there, grey with fear.

Quickly I told Stuart what had happened, and before I was finished he had hold of Morgan.

Stuart barked, "We're going down there to see what this howling is all about. Lock your windows and door as soon as we're gone, Dorothy."

Morgan whined protests, but he was with us when we raced out onto the hotel porch, to stand there a moment to get our bearings from the bark of the deputy's revolver. We found Sprague less than a block from the hotel, bending over a crumpled figure that sprawled in the road. One glance was sufficient to reveal the torn body of a young man, his shirt ripped off him and his chest a ghastly horror of shredded flesh and spewing blood.

"I seen her!" the deputy was babbling. "I seen her—an' I fired at her. But there's no use firin'. You can't kill creatures like that. Bullets won't harm 'em—the Devil protects 'em—"

Stuart and I were kneeling beside the frightfully torn figure, raising the man in our arms. There was no use trying to staunch the blood; death was only a matter of seconds, but perhaps he would speak. Yes, words were coming from his blood-drooling lips.

"Lovely," he gasped. "Naked an' lovely—I couldn't help myself when I looked at her. I knew she was a cat—but I couldn't help . . ."

The crimson tide welled up in his throat, clotted there and choked him, and when he sank back in my arms he was a lifeless corpse.

"Jest like the others," Ed Sprague muttered. "The cat-woman come for them an' they hafta go—even though they know they're gonna die."

"What is all this about cats and cat-women?" I turned to Ross Morgan for an explanation. "You know what's going on here, Morgan—I can see that on your face. Out with it."

"I don't know any more than the

others," Morgan stated, "and I don't wanna know any more. Three weeks now it's been going on. The first victim was young Stanley Brooks—he lived at the hotel. When we found his body it was just like Jerry Moore, there—all torn to pieces. Then there was Cleve Chivers, and Art Lovett, and Orrie Simmons—they were all lured out into the fields on the edge of town and murdered. Orrie lived long enough to tell us that it was a woman—a beautiful woman that looked like a cat—that's all we could get out of him before he died. But Steve Boley saw one of the creatures—he says they're half-tiger and half-woman—he says they can run like the wind—"

"Hell creatures," Ed Sprague mumbled as he crossed his fingers and made cabalistic signs on his breast. "Werewolves, that's what they are—people that's been turned into murderin' cats by the Devil or one of his agents."

"That's what the people here in the village have been saying," Morgan nodded his head. "These creatures leave tracks like animals, but they've been seen, and they have the bodies of humans—humans that can tear a man's throat out and rip his body into mincemeat. That's all I know about them, Mr. Thayer—that's all anybody knows."

"Werewolves do that," Sprague shook his head and glanced around him fearfully, as if he expected to find the creatures creeping up on him. "They can take human form or animal form, an' they can just go up in a cloud o' smoke. The Devil does that for 'em."

So that was the explanation of the terror that hung over Windover and chained its inhabitants behind their bolted doors. Even now, with all this howling and shooting going on in the street, not a man had appeared to find out what it was all about, although I could sense anxious eyes watching us from the black windows of nearby houses.

And as I listened to Sprague's frightened, superstitious babble, I remembered the strange, tawny creature that had leaped into the brush as we drove into town. That *was* a human being; now there could be no doubt of it. It was a human being—or was it one of those incredible demon-creatures that these superstitious creatures believed it?

I HAD investigated lycanthropes quite thoroughly; read through much of the legendary evidence that had been gathered in Europe, and never had I discovered anything that led me to believe that creatures such as these were reputed to be could be possible. Unless they were victims of the modern disease we know as lycanthropy—the mental disorder which makes its victims believe themselves to be animals.

Those were the symptoms Mildred Richmond had shown, the malady she seemed to have contracted. Again a chill

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of terror ran down my back like an icy stream. Was it possible, I asked myself fearfully, that the creature we saw leaping away from the mangled body of the dog was human—that it was Mildred, escaped from the sanitarium and running loose to indulge her mania wherever she might find a victim?

That would account for Dr. Oliphant's peculiar behavior, for his evasiveness and his anxiety to get us out of the sanitarium. . . .

If that creature we saw was human it was undoubtedly mad, whether it was Mildred or not—and in that moment I was certain that Melvin Oliphant knew more about this devilish business than any other man in the village. I told Stuart of my suspicions as we returned to the hotel, and we agreed to go back to the sanitarium to have another talk with the doctor, whether he liked it or not.

Dorothy was cowering in bed when I went back to our room, but after I had reassured her and again locked the door I rejoined Stuart. Together we strode across town and climbed the hill to the sanitarium.

"Not a light," he commented as we went up the front walk. "That's strange. I thought they kept light on all night in places like this."

Not only was there no light, but there was no sign of life when we rang the bell and banged on the door. It was as if the place had been evacuated since our visit; as if the doctor and all his patients had flown.

"Mighty strange," I agreed as no answer came to my repeated halloos. "These windows are all barred and shuttered here in front, but maybe we can find a way to get in somewhere in the back."

That hope was vain. The sanitarium was as tight as a prison. Everything was securely locked and barred, and nowhere was there a light or a sign of life. Puzzled, I stood off and regarded the black mass of the building, and then noticed the old barn some distance in the rear.

Not knowing just why I did so, I led the way toward it, turned my flashlight in through the partly open doorway—and whistled with surprise. There, half-concealed behind a litter of broken wagons and decrepit, out-moded automobiles, was a machine I was sure I recognized. When I went in and turned my light on it I saw that I had not been mistaken—that rakish looking car was Earl Richmond's!

"Earl Richmond's!" Stuart repeated my announcement incredulously. "Hell, that rotter hasn't been near Mildred for almost a year. Why should he be here? You sure you can't be mistaken in the car?"

"Not a chance," I affirmed as I examined the machine more closely. "This is his car. I saw him driving it only last week. He's around here somewhere, Stuart—and what I want to know is, why?"

BUT it was very evident that we were not going to find the answer at the sanitarium that night. Nothing that we did brought a response from within, and at last we started back to the hotel—but before we had covered more than half the distance my ears tingled again as a shriek of pain leaped at me from out of the darkness ahead. A shriek of pain that was tinged with wild terror; the final scream of a man going to his death—and knowing full well the horrible fate that awaited him!

"My God—there it is again!" Stuart groaned, and he was racing through the night beside me.

We almost ran full-tilt into Ed Sprague as he darted from the cover of a building and raced across the public square clutching a rifle. Twice his weapon barked, and then he uttered a yelp of satisfaction and ran to where something light

and tawny leaped into the air. For a moment it seemed to poise there while a wild-cat scream ululated from its throat; then it plunged to the ground and lay writhing in the dust.

Before we could run up and grab his arm Sprague had pumped another bullet into the creature. It kicked spasmodically and lay still.

"Silver bullets—that's what done it," Sprague was mumbling when we came up beside him. "That's the only way to kill a werewolf—the others go right through 'em an' never hurt 'em. I cast these special—they're still hot from the mold—but they got the murderin' creature—"

I was bending over the sprawled figure, playing my flashlight on it—and what the beam of light revealed brought out the goose pimples on my skin and covered my body with clammy sweat! I did not believe in werewolves or demon creatures of any sort, but the thing at which I stared seemed to be neither beast nor human!

It was a woman—a naked woman of about thirty-five, I judged. Her body was covered from head to foot with fine blond hair, as soft as the downiest fur. Her hands and feet were encased in huge cat-paws, armed with wicked, flesh-clotted claws, the paws of a lynx or cougar, that laced around her wrists and ankles—but it was her face that threatened to stop the breath in my nostrils.

Her face was unmistakably catlike, her ears pointed at the tips; her eyes, even in death, were open only a slit—and growing out of her upper lip were eight tough, bristly whiskers, fully four inches long! Regular feelers such as are the equipment of all the cat family!

Spellbound I stared down into that fantastic, impossible face—and I hardly heard Ed Sprague's voice behind me.

"That's Henrietta Dunham," he was saying. "Dunno what happened to her face an' her skin, but that's Henrietta, all right—I've seed her hundreds of times up at the sanitarium. Jeez," he muttered in awe, "look at those claws on her hands—covered with her father's blood!"

"Her father?" I turned to him questioningly.

"Yeah, old Ira—that was him we heard yellin'," the deputy nodded. "She murdered her own father. . . ."

As I stared down into that weird face the dead lips seemed to draw back from the teeth like those of a cat I had once seen crushed by a truck. Henrietta Dunham—dying there like a cat. The night was warm, hot even—but something cold and clammy seemed to settle over me, to chill me to my bones.

Demon-creatures — werewolves — my brain could not accept them; nor could it accept this thing that was lying on the ground before me. There was something evil here—something so incredibly evil that my mind hardly dared to dwell upon it!

CHAPTER THREE

Death Call

WE PICKED up that unnatural corpse, and a feeling of queasiness swept over me as my fingers touched the hairy limbs. Between us we carried her to the porch and stretched her out on the floor, to lift Ira Dunham's mangled body and put it down beside her. Like young Jerry Moore, the old man's entire torso was ripped and lacerated as if it had been through a grinding machine. Nothing but a gaping hole remained where his throat had been—and his face; that was the worst of all.

"This man knew what he was facing," I said softly to Stuart Hurley so that the others wouldn't hear. "Look at that mask of terror. Have you ever seen anything like it? He knew, all right—he knew just what was going on around here, and he

knew that at last his hour had come."

"Knew that it was his own daughter," Stuart added. "No wonder his face is contorted like that. The poor devil, he—"

He stopped short as another footstep sounded on the porch and Ross Morgan stood there beside us, staring down wide-eyed at the corpses. For a moment he swayed as if he would fall; then a low gasp gurgled up from his throat as he started to back away.

"He brought it on himself," he half-moaned. "He brought it on himself. I tried to shut his mouth—I tried to save him—but he went right on—"

"What's that, Morgan?" Stuart leaped to his side and grasped him by an arm, whirled him around and shook him. "What do you know about this? What did you try to save him from? Who got him because he talked?"

Every question seemed to drain a bit more of the color from the hotelkeeper's face. Again he was a sickly grey, as he had been when Jerry Moore's dying scream echoed through the night. Doggedly he shook his head.

"I don't know—I don't know what I was talking about. Weeks of this—it takes a man's mind away," was all that we could get from him; but as I stared searchingly into his face I knew that terror had sealed his lips, quaking terror that reduced him to nausea as we watched him.

"There's one point we have to go on," I turned to Stuart and the deputy. "This woman came from the sanitarium. She had been confined there for the past fifteen years or more, and I want to know how she came to be roaming loose—and in this condition."

"She's the answer to this werewolf scare, of course," Stuart contributed, "and it will be sort of interesting to hear what the good doctor has to say about her. Want to take her up there to him now?"

That was exactly what I did want to do. Stuart and I picked up the body, and Ed Sprague led the way with his silver-bullet loaded rifle. He, too, was convinced that we had laid the terror, but his attitude as he darted wary glances on all sides said all too plainly that never again as long as he lived would the night be free of slinking, prowling demon-creatures waiting to spring out at him from all sides.

This time, when we rang the bell and banged on the door of the sanitarium, there was a response. Dr. Oliphant, fully dressed and wearing his white surgeon's coat, answered and ushered us in—but the moment he recognized us I noticed that his uneasiness returned; and when he saw our burden his eyes widened with surprise—and a hint of something that I was sure was terror. Terror that faded and gave way to professional interest as he stooped over the woman and fingered her curiously.

"How-come that she was roaming around the town in this condition, doctor?" I plumped at him. "She was supposed to be confined here, wasn't she? A hopeless maniac who should not have been at large."

Melvin Oliphant's eyes clouded and his thin lips worked nervously as he looked from one to the other of us.

"Yes, she should have been confined," he bobbed his head vigorously. "But she was harmless. We let her have the run of the place; used her for simple duties. Two months ago she disappeared. I didn't warn the authorities because I was afraid mention of her name would reopen the old scandal and drive away what little business I have been able to build up. I tried in every way to locate her—but she seemed to have disappeared without leaving a trace. I thought she was dead—began to hope that she was—and then these mysterious attacks upon young men in the town began to occur—"

OLIPHANT was kneeling beside the body now, studying the dead face, fingering the long, bristly whiskers.

"Strange," he murmured to himself. "I can understand the whiskers—but how they could have grown there—how this woman could actually have been changing into an animal . . . Gentleman, for centuries scientists. . ."

In that moment he was a scientist, a professor lecturing his class. All else was forgotten as he became thoroughly absorbed in his subject; as he turned the dead face and peered into it intently. And as I watched him I wondered just what sort of man this uncle of Dorothy's was—how much a man and how much a scientist who had lost all human feeling.

One moment his scholarly voice was the only sound in the dead stillness of the night—and in the next unholy bedlam had broken loose!

From the direction of the village came a hellish cacophony that chilled my blood and seemed to turn my fingers into things of ice.

An anguished wail that slobbered off into a moan of terror, of unbearable agony; that piercing animal scream that clutched at my heart and filled me with nameless dread—and then a shriek that left me weak and almost powerless to move.

That shriek of Dorothy's! I would have recognized her voice anywhere, and now it seemed to be calling to me despairingly! Dorothy, down there at the mercy of God only knew what impossible creatures!

Suddenly my feet were milling beneath me, were racing without conscious direction from my brain. Pale moonlight made the way hardly distinguishable, but I did not think of my flesh. Dorothy needed me, and I was going to her no matter what might rise up to bar my way.

"Dorothy! Dorothy!" I seemed to hear a man's voice calling her name—or was that my own voice crying out frantically in my brain?

Footsteps were pounding along behind me, and Stuart's voice was calling to me out of the darkness, telling me that they were coming. But that did not matter. All that mattered was that I must get to her before it was too late!

There was a figure stretched out on the porch of the hotel, I saw as I sprinted up the steps. One glance as I leaped over it told me that this latest victim of the ghastly beast scourge was Ross Morgan. Like his handyman, he lay there weltering in a pool of his own blood, his throat and torso a shocking horror. But I had time for no more than a glance. Then I was past him, was flying up the stairs three steps at a time.

"Dorothy! Dorothy!" was panting breathlessly from my lips—but the moment I reached the upper hallway all the strength seemed to drain out of me.

The door of our room stood open!

Somehow I managed to drive my trembling legs over to that ominously open doorway—but even before I reached it I knew what I would find. The room was empty. Dorothy was gone!

The world seemed to spin around me as I stared at the empty bed, with the disordered sheets dragged out onto the floor. Dorothy was gone—and when I found her again . . Before my eyes swam a vision of the ghastly corpses which fairly littered Windover. Would I find her like that—with her throat ripped out and her glorious breasts reduced to bleeding pulp?

Shuddering horror made my brain reel, made me grasp at the doorway for support. Subconsciously I noticed that one of the windows was open wide, the screen removed. Like an automaton I stalked over to it and looked out into the night.

The window was on the rear of the hotel; looked out over a field that ran up a short hill to a fringe of woods. The rising moon was sufficiently bright now

to bathe that field in a pale glow—a pale glow through which the figure of a man staggered, half-walking and half-running. The figure of a man carrying the limp form of a woman in his arms, making directly for that dark strip of woods.

Gradually my wide-staring eyes focused, and I saw that the woman was Dorothy. The man flashed a glance behind him, and by his stiff pompadour of blond hair I knew that he was John Eskridge, Dr. Oliphant's assistant. John Eskridge carrying off my Dorothy into the night!

SPELLBOUND I stood there watching, unable to move a muscle; unable to control my parched throat to shout after them, to sound a call for help. He was already more than halfway to the woods—but then he stopped and again glanced around him fearfully.

Only then did I see the two tawny figures that crouched one on each side of him, still a distance away but closing in as they kept pace with his every step. Two tawny figures that were bent over like beasts, their heads swaying from side to side. They were closing in, closing in.

Strangled, inarticulate sounds came from my throat as I tried to shout a warning—but Eskridge already realized his danger. He was backing up, trying to retreat—but his escape was cut off by another tawny figure that was closing in on him from the rear. Suddenly he stopped and lowered Dorothy to the ground, and then he was leaping forward, to come to grips with the two who were springing at him like great jungle cats!

Eskridge never had a chance against those creatures. With a rush the two of them were upon him, bearing him to the ground. Then the third was with them in the kill, snarling and screaming as they milled over him like wild beasts.

When I came back to my senses and started racing to his rescue I never will know. All I do know is that I was out of the hotel, sprinting madly across the field with Stuart and the deputy at my side, and with Dr. Oliphant panting along behind us.

"Don't shoot them!" I heard myself yelling at the deputy. "Don't shoot them! Try to take one of them alive!"

Before we reached Eskridge I saw that it would be too late. No man could withstand three of those sharp-clawed creatures for that length of time. They were already slinking away from what was left of him, loping off toward the nearby woods; but Ed Sprague was after them, swinging his rifle like a club. The stock came down on the head of one of them, sent her reeling to the ground. Before she could get back onto her feet we pounced on her. All three of us grabbed her and threw her back onto the ground, pinning her there under our combined weight.

Dr. Oliphant had stopped beside Dorothy, to lift her unconscious form and half-carry her to where we were struggling with our captive, but by the time he arrived we were having all we could do to hold her down. Hissing and spitting, she snapped at us with her teeth and lashed out at us with her sharp-clawed hands and feet.

But at last we had her pinioned so that she could barely move—and not until then did we get a good view of her face. To my amazement and horror, I stared down at the snarling features of Mildred Richmond, my sister-in-law!

Mildred's face—but now hardly recognizable. Her eyes were narrowed to cold slits that glared at us balefully—and there were long, bristly whiskers growing out of her upper lip! Entirely unashamed of her nakedness, she writhed and twisted into every possible position. As she rubbed against me I saw that a soft down was beginning to grow on her body; a tawny fur that would soon coat her from

head to foot like Henrietta Dunham.

"Mildred!" Dr. Oliphant gasped, and he backed away from her as if he feared we would let her loose to fly at his throat. "Mildred—can't you speak to me?"

She didn't seem to hear him; but when he came closer and knelt beside her to make queer, animal noises her eyes widened and a soft, purring response came from her throat. Mildred Richmond was no longer a human being; she was an animal in human form—a murderous cat ready to tear the life out of the first victim she could seize!

"LYCANTHROPY—in a most advanced stage," Oliphant shook his head. "She was suffering from it when she came to me, but we had her on the way to a cure—but now she has lapsed terribly. She thinks she is some sort of a cat—and the strangest part of it is that she is actually turning into one. It seems incredible that this is a manifestation of the power of mind over matter—and yet, unless we accept that explanation, we must accept the old theory of lycanthropy—must concede that she has actually been turned into a beast by some demoniacal power beyond our comprehension."

"A werewolf, that's what she is," the deputy muttered as he fingered his rifle nervously. "Better let me put a silver bullet through her, or she'll make herself disappear right out o' your hands."

"A werewolf," Oliphant mused—and suddenly he was all alarm for the girl's safety. "No—put up that gun!" he whirled on Sprague. "That would be murder. I don't think she is a werewolf—though she is the closest approach to one that science ever knew. So close that we can't tell when the dividing line will be reached. I'll take her back to the sanitarium and see that she has proper treatments."

But as I looked down at the writhing body on the ground cold fear iced its way through my veins. Fear of just what, I could not say. Fear of Oliphant? Perhaps—for there was something hellish shining in his eyes as he watched his niece. To him this girl was no longer a human being, no longer his blood relative; now she had become a freak of nature, a nature-perversion, to be studied and experimented upon. Instead of sympathy for her, he was actually glad of her condition, glad of the opportunity for study it afforded him.

Yet the wave of gelid terror that coursed through me was not for Mildred—it was for Dorothy!

In that moment I saw Ira Dunham's contorted face glaring at me; heard his vindictive voice snarling at me:

"You'll sing a different tune when her fine body is any man's to look at! You think you're lucky, don't ye? Well, maybe you'll change yer mind when she uses them charms o' hers to drag men to their deaths!"

What had he meant by that? Had he known about these beast-women—was that what he meant—that Dorothy would be turned into an animal like this, to stalk the countryside stark naked, waiting to prey on unsuspecting victims like a huge jungle cat?

And that must have been what Ross Morgan meant when he said that Ira had talked too much. Yes, the hotelkeeper must have known about these women, too —must have known the dread secret of what had brought them to this appalling condition. But Ira Dunham was dead, and so was Ross Morgan; their lips were sealed—and the diabolical fiend who was working this unbelievable deviltry was still at large; still free to ensnare Dorothy and reduce her to the awful state of these pitiful victims!

Cold fear closed around my heart like a hand of steel as I gathered my wife into my arms and stood trembling, wondering fearfully from which direction the unearthly menace would strike.

CHAPTER FOUR

Devil's Surgery

WE HAD barely put Dorothy back into bed before she opened her eyes and stared around her wildly. For a moment panicky terror was mirrored on her face; then she recognized me and sank sobbing into my arms while I did my best to comfort her and try to find out what had happened to her.

"Thank God, you're here, darling!" she gasped as she clung to me. "It was terrible—like a fearful nightmare. I was so tired, so exhausted, that I dozed off after you left—and then suddenly I was awake and there was something hanging over me and looking down at me . . . something that seemed to be big and black in the darkness. I tried to scream, but before a sound could come from my lips a big hand clamped down over my mouth and pressed my head back into the pillow. I couldn't move, couldn't do a thing but lie there helplessly while that thing pressed down on me and something stung me again and again—"

"Something stung you?" I picked up her phrase quickly.

"That's what it seemed like," she groped for memory. "Something that bit into my breasts and my arms. I could feel it stinging into my neck—and that's all I remember—until now. . . ."

Something that stung her! Terror stabbed at me as I realized what that might mean—that she might already be inoculated with the hellish virus that would eventually reduce her to the level of the beasts!

But now Dr. Oliphant was bending over her and examining her.

"Respiration's okay," he checked. "Nothing the matter with her heart action. The trouble is you've had a pretty bad fright, Dorothy, and you fainted. You may be a bit weak if you try to get up, but you'll come around all right in a little while."

I sighed with relief—until he nodded to me and motioned me to one side, where we could talk in private.

"She seems to be all right," he amended then. "Nothing noticably wrong with her; no marks on her body—except several barely discernible pricks in her skin. I can't tell, but they may have been made by a hypodermic needle. You'll have to watch her very closely, Gordon, and report to me the first suspicious indication you may notice."

My heart was like a thing of lead in my breast as I heard those dismaying words. Needle marks on her body! Then she had not been mistaken; she *had* been attacked —*had* felt the stinging sensations she barely remembered. As I glanced up into his face again I caught that gleam of hidden excitement in Oliphant's eyes—and

something whispered to me that he hoped that Dorothy had been inoculated; he *wanted* the fearful virus to be in her veins so that he could study her as he would study Mildred!

And again suspicion of this cold-blooded man of science gnawed at me and I wondered just how far he would go to conduct his experiments. Mildred had been suffering from lycanthropy when she was sent to him. That interested him in the malady—and since then this queer outbreak had occurred; since then the cat-women had been scourging the town. Was it possible that they were creatures of his making?

"Mildred was supposed to be under your care," I flung at him suddenly. "You knew of her condition; knew that she was not safe to be left at large—so why did we find her as we did tonight? This makes two of your patients who have been prowling the village like beasts when they were supposed to be safely locked up in your sanitarium, doctor."

Oliphant's face went a shade paler and his eyes filmed with worry.

"I've been fearing something like this," he admitted. "Ever since she disappeared I've been dreading the way we would find her. How she got loose I have no idea; and she isn't the only one. Besides Mildred and Henrietta four other young women have vanished from the sanitarium as if the earth had swallowed them up. I've been scouring the whole country for them without as much as a trace—"

"And you didn't report them missing—didn't report that half a dozen lunatics were at large when you heard of these beast-murders that have been terrorizing the village?" I demanded.

"They weren't dangerous cases," Oliphant shook his head. "And I was afraid—I was afraid the authorities would take away my license and close up my place altogether. Yes," he half-whispered, "I was afraid the girls might be mixed up with this, but what good would it have done to ruin myself for no purpose? Perhaps I was wrong in not reporting the disappearances, but I was only trying to protect myself."

FOR a moment he was silent, thoughtful; then once more his face brightened and his eyes glowed.

"No, it would not have put a stop to the scourge had I reported those disappearances, it would only have eliminated me, the one man who can get to the bottom of it," he went on excitedly. "But now I will be able to solve it; now I can get to the bottom of lycanthropy and solve the age-old riddle for all time. Never has a man had better material, Gordon—it is almost incredible! Women with actual feelers connected with the trigeminal nerve!

"Probably you do not realize it," he warmed to his subject, "but we human beings have, in the flesh of our faces, the full apparatus of the trigeminal nerve system which operates a cat's feelers, or whiskers, as we commonly call them. The hairs themselves have long since atrophied and ceased to be a part of human equipment, but here we have two girls metamorphised back into beasts so completely that the discarded feelers have once more sprouted. How they could have been made to grow is baffling—unless some power which we little suspect has been brought to bear; some inhuman. . ."

As I watched Melvin Oliphant's face I saw that he was completely carried away by his speculations. That one of his nieces had become a raving maniac who thought herself a beast and that the other had been attacked and might have been inoculated and started toward the same awful doom meant nothing to him. Already he was envisioning himself in the role of scientific pioneer, hearing himself acclaimed for a discovery that had baffled men for centuries.

Was it possible, I asked myself again, that this man was such a rabidly enthusiastic seeker after scientific truth that he had allowed his work to run away with him? Was it possible that he had become so immersed in his subject that he had committed these fearful atrocities in the name of science? Stranger things than that had happened. . . .

Suddenly I remembered Earl Richmond's automobile half-concealed in the sanitarium barn. Richmond had never impressed me as a man with sufficient brains to engineer anything so hellishly ingenious as this, but if he was in Windover I wanted to know where and why.

"Earl Richmond's automobile—in my barn?" Oliphant's brow wrinkled and his eyes widened with surprise when I asked him about it. "That isn't possible, Gordon. I haven't seen or heard from Earl for the past year. There's no reason why he should come here. You must have been mistaken."

But I wasn't mistaken; I knew that—and as I fell asleep that night Earl Richmond's car was just another of the apparently unconnected parts of this grisly mystery that utterly baffled me. Somewhere, I felt certain, it tied in with the deviltry that had been going on in Windover—but where? . . ."

Sleep held me only fitfully. A dozen times I came awake suddenly, my nerves atingle, atuned to a danger which I could sense but could not discover. Each time, my anxious eyes turned to Dorothy, but always she was there beside me, sleeping peacefully. A dozen times during the night I studied her sweet face in the half-dark, anxiously searching for the dread indications I feared.

Then the sun was coming over the hills and daylight was beginning to stream in the windows. When I opened my eyes that time and turned to her, a strange premonition crept over me. She was right up against me, curled up almost in a knot and pressed close to my body as if for warmth. For a moment I could feel myself flinching away from her, could feel my flesh shrinking back from her touch—until I took hold of myself firmly and stretched an arm around her.

Gently I patted her naked shoulder, stroked my fingers over her soft skin—until they stopped as if turned to stone. That queer sound that was coming from her throat—it was a low rumble; a contented purr!

Before I could move my hand away she pressed closer to me and her cheek was rubbing against my arm, rubbing back and forth and from side to side—and that purring sound was becoming louder and more unmistakable. Now her eyes were half open, slitted eyes through which I could barely see pupils, that were vertical! Her arms were going around me, arms that moved constantly, that rubbed against my body, back and forth, back and forth—*like a cat rubbing against a man!*

"Dorothy! Dorothy!" I at last found my voice. "For God's sake, darling—stop it!"

BUT now her whole body was against me, enveloping me, rubbing against me with that peculiarly feline motion. I tried to hold her off, tried to shake her, but her eyes gleamed down into mine and a frozen little smile played around the corners of her mouth. Without a word she sinuously writhed out of her nightgown, and the glory of her naked body nearly robbed me of all resistance—until her lips closed over mine.

Hundreds of times our lips have held that sweet communion—but never in a manner such as that. Dorothy's lips were avid, passion-maddened, savage in their intensity—and the purring noise in her throat was so loud that it filled my ears with a terrifying rumble.

Desperation took hold of me then.

With all the strength I could summon I pushed her away, hurled her back onto the bed and leaped out the other side. Frantically I rushed to the bureau and seized a pitcher of drinking water, threw it full into her face—and then stood trembling to watch the result.

Dorothy was drenched, but when she opened her eyes and blinked the water out of them I saw that she was once more normal.

"What's the matter, darling?" she asked dully; and then, before I could answer, "Oh, my head—it aches frightfully!"

As gently as possible I told her that she had had a nightmare and that there was no other way to rouse her from it; but now my eyes followed her every movement fearfully. And as I watched chill after chill ran down my spine—for what I saw was unmistakable. The rabid seizure had passed, but a subtle change had come over Dorothy; an almost indefinable thing that showed itself in her every movement, her every gesture, in the look of her eyes, the way she held her head, in the sway of her body as she walked. *All reminded me of a sleek cat!*

That must be my imagination, I tried to tell myself—but no amount of reasoning would still the wild alarm that was clamoring in my brain.

"I'm going to get the village doctor up here to give you something for that headache," I told her. But when Dr. Stevens came in response to my summons I watched him anxiously.

Would he, too, notice the terrifying symptoms that I detected? Fearfully my eyes studied his face, followed his every movement—and then I felt suddenly weak with sheer relief.

"There's nothing wrong with her," he shook his head as he turned to me. "Probably too much excitement last night. An attack of nerves that will pass with a little more rest. These pills—" he fished a bottle out of his bag—"are a sedative. They will put her to sleep for a few hours, and when she wakes up her headache should be gone."

Dorothy took the pills without protest, and in a few minutes she dropped off to sleep.

"That's good," Stuart Hurley nodded his satisfaction when he came to the door. "I've been thinking more and more about the worthy Dr. Oliphant—and the more I think the less I like the look of things so far as he is concerned. He may be quite all right—but it strikes me that he'll bear a bit more investigation. As long as Dorothy is asleep we can slip up to the sanitarium now and give him the once-over."

Even in the morning sunshine Windover was a village of terror. Almost nobody was on the streets, and those we encountered eyed us suspiciously or slunk out of sight before we reached them.

"Not the front door," Stuart outlined his plan as we approached the grim old sanitarium. "Let's slip up to the building through that clump of lilacs over there at the side. Maybe we can find a way to get in—some way we missed last night in the dark. I'd like to get a look at old Oliphant when he doesn't know he's being watched."

We had almost circled the place before we found the opening we sought—a steel grating at a cellar window that came away in my hands when I tugged at it. Stuart chuckled with satisfaction and unfastened the window behind it, to lead the way down into the cellar.

The place was dark and littered with rubbish, but we made our way cautiously from end to end until we located a stairway that led upward to an unlocked door. That door opened onto a long corridor lined with other doors. Stealthily we started along it, trying each knob as we passed. All were locked until we were almost to the center of the corridor—and

then Stuart's hand closed on my arm warningly.

The door before which we had stopped was locked like the rest, a heavy metal door—but there was a narrow strip of glass set in it at about eye level; a door such as is used in asylums and hospitals to keep watch over patients. But the "patient" behind that door was Melvin Oliphant himself!

THE room seemed to be his infirmary or laboratory; a room fitted up with operating tables, surgical apparatus, rows of bottles against the walls, and all the impedimenta of a scientific man's workshop. Oliphant was busy in the center of it, a white-clad figure in a surgeon's outfit complete to gauze mask and pillbox cap that clamped down to the edges of his fringe of sparse grey hair. There was someone stretched out on the table before him, a white-sheeted figure—but for several moments we could see no more than that.

Then the white-coated back turned to one side—and my teeth clamped down on my tongue to stifle the exclamation of surprise that sprang to my lips. The figure securely fastened to that table was Earl Richmond, Mildred's husband, held in vises that did not permit him to turn his head the slightest fraction of an inch!

"My God—Earl!" Stuart whispered at my side—and then his hand tightened on my arm and we strained our ears to catch the low rumble of Oliphant's voice, barely audible through the window glass.

"You see this little needle?" he held a loaded hypodermic up in front of the helpless man's eyes. "Well, very soon it will reunite you with your wife. Once the brownish mixture in this barrel mingles with your blood you will be on your way back to beasthood. You saw Mildred pacing up and down like a tigress rubbing against the bars of her cage. Very soon you will be just like that—and then I'll let you in with her. That will be the most interesting part of my experiment—two people who have been turned into animals; when they mate what will their offspring be? I don't know—but you are going to show me."

I shuddered with revulsion and my hands knotted into tightly balled fists as I realized the full horror of the unholy thing that demented experimenter planned. It was incredible that anyone could conceive a scheme so monstrous—and yet, even as I stood there watching with popping eyes, the hypodermic needle jabbed into Richmond's neck at the base of the brain and the plunger pressed downward until the barrel was drained!

"That is the first step," Oliphant chuckled, as he walked to a closet and lifted from one of its shelves a shallow glass vessel filled with a reddish-brown culture in which dozens of long white hairs were growing. "These," he held the container up in front of Richmond's eyes, "will be the next. Feelers—I'm going to plant eight of them in your upper lip—going to unite them with the trigeminal nerve in your face so that your senses will become entirely those of an animal; so that you will slip back into the ways of the beasts."

"God—what a fiend!" Stuart whispered at my ear.

"The man's stark mad," I whispered back. "We've got to get in there, Stuart. We've got to stop him somehow—even if we have to break down this door to do it."

"You can't batter your way in with an axe," he warned.

His hands were on my arms, holding them at my sides—and beads of perspiration oozed out on my forehead as I watched. Watched while Oliphant's hellish knives opened tiny slits on Earl Richmond's lip—while those hairs were lifted delicately and inserted into the wounds—made fast there with some devil's prep-

aration. Watched until four of them stood out grotesquely from his face—and then I could stand no more.

With a sudden wrench I tore loose from Stuart's hold and hammered against that window while my feet beat a tattoo against the door.

"Oliphant!" I howled. "Stop it! Stop it—do you hear? Open this door or I'll see that you go to the electric chair!"

He didn't even bother to look around, if he heard me—but Stuart was shaking me by the shoulder and shouting something in my ear; something about cat-women. And then I saw them—saw them crouching in the corridor just as they leaped at us!

From all sides they seemed to come—naked figures that pounced upon us and wrapped their legs around us while their claw-tipped paws darted at our throats and faces. For a moment I was knocked back against the door—and before my eyes Stuart went down, his terrified scream ringing in my ears as they bore him to the floor.

Just for a moment . . . and then I was swept from my feet and a welter of savagely lashing bodies overwhelmed me. Desperately I tried to protect my face and throat from those murderous talons as I went down onto my knees, as I crawled and twisted my way through that snarling, biting, scratching mass of human beasts. My face was ripped, my scalp was torn; blood was running down into my eyes and blinding me. But by some miracle I wormed my way through them.

For an instant I looked back, but Stuart had made no attempt to rise and his screams were stilled. He was underneath that snarling pack somewhere, and I knew that there was nothing I could do for him. All that I could possibly hope to do was to make my own escape—to get out into the blessed outdoors and stagger as fast as my feet would carry me to Dorothy. I had to get her away—had to get her out of that hotel and out of Windover without a second's delay, before she, too, became a helpless victim of this beast mania!

CHAPTER FIVE

Beast Taint

ED SPRAGUE was in charge at the hotel when I reached the porch, panting. Armed with clubs, nearly a dozen sworn deputies were patrolling the building, and they quickly gathered around me, staring at my bloody face with round, awe-widened eyes.

"Oliphant—over at the sanitarium—he's changing a man into a beast!" I told them as I gasped for breath. "Those cat-women—they're all there in the sanitarium—killed my friend Hurley. There's a basement window open; you can get in that way."

Sprague didn't try to stop me as I raced for the door. At the head of half a dozen of his men he started for the sanitarium. But now my only interest was upstairs, up in the room I had left less than an hour ago.

The door was still closed, I saw with a wave of relief as I reached the top of the stairs and sprinted down the hallway. It was still locked as I jammed the key into the keyhole. No sound from inside—which meant that Dorothy must be asleep.

Now if I could only awaken her, if only I could get her up and dressed—get her downstairs and into Stuart's car. . . .

But she was awake. She was awake and staring at me with eyes that were half-closed—staring as she sat on her legs on the bed, stark naked in the bright morning sunshine. On the floor beside the bed was what was left of her dainty nightgown, tattered ribbons of silk that looked as if they had been ripped and torn from her body.

"Dorothy, darling—" I started to speak, while my heart climbed right up into my throat.

That was as far as I got. The rest of the words seemed to fade on my lips as I watched her slip out of bed. For a moment she stood there in front of me, exquisitely lovely in her nudity as the muscles rippled beneath her skin and her whole body undulated seductively. Again my whole being thrilled to the magic of her glorious body—and then turned sick with unholy terror as I realized what had happened to her!

She was worse, far worse, than when I had left her. The dread metamorphosis was far more advanced than before she had dropped off to sleep. Now her very appearance was unmistakably animal.

Slowly, sinuously, with the slinking gait of a cat she was coming toward me—and her narrowed eyes never left my face. Transfixed with horror, I let her come; let her get right up beside me and drop into a crouch as she rubbed her body against mine—but this time her reaction to that feline habit was astonishing. As soon as her skin touched the cloth of my suit she sprang back fully ten feet and crouched there on her hands and knees, her back arched, her eyes narrowed to mere slits, and her venomous hiss spitting from her lips!

"Dorothy!" I begged. "What has happened to you. Let me—"

I tried to walk toward her, but she backed away, backed until she was trapped in a corner. Suddenly I leaped and caught her in my arms—but her body shrank away from me and her pain-filled voice shrieked in my ears as she fought to get away. Pure agony flamed in her eyes until I relinquished my hold and let her dart across the room.

"Dorothy," I tried again. "We've got to get out of here. I've got to get you to the city. You've got to get dressed—"

From the chair beside the bed I had surreptitiously picked up her dress. If I could get that onto her it would be sufficient. Carefully I edged my way to her—and then leaped in, to grab her and throw her on the bed; to hold her there while I pulled the light dress over her head. But all the while she was screaming like a mad thing—screams that were pulsating with throbbing agony.

Wildly she tore at the dress and ripped it from her body in tatters the moment I let her loose. Not until the last fragment was plucked from off her shoulder was she satisfied; not until then did the livid pain die out of her eyes. But now she cowered away from me like an animal that expects to be beaten or tortured.

It was no use talking to her, no use pleading with her—she did not seem to hear, did not seem to be able to answer. No, something terrifying whispered within me, she didn't understand; language was no longer a part of her mental equipment—any more than it was of any animal!

But I had to get her out of there, even if I had to seize her and tie her up; even if I had to bundle her into the car that way and drive her back to New York. With that desperate intention I hurled myself across the room and grabbed for her, but she was so agile that I could do no more than grasp her arm.

For a split-second I clutched at her. Then her teeth sank deep into my hand, while her clawing fingers raked my face!

INVOLUNTARILY I flinched away from the pain of that attack. Before I could stop her she had darted to the door and yanked it open, had leaped out into the hall and was running toward the stairs. Frantically I raced after her, calling her name and begging her to come back, but she dived down the stairway. Then she was out on the porch of the hotel, stark naked before the gaping eyes of the guarding villagers!

With sickening force old Ira Dunham's words came back to me. This was what he had meant when he said that Dorothy's body would be any man's to look at—and I wondered whether he was chuckling in hell as he enjoyed his revenge. . . .

Stunned with horror, I raced after her, while the hopelessness of what I was doing seemed to weight my feet with lead. Before I reached the porch she was on the sidewalk, running toward the sanitarium end of the village—just as Ed Sprague's men came racing back down the street in full retreat. Fearfully they looked back over their shoulders to where four naked women panted after them, saliva drooling from their open mouths as they came on like hungry jungle creatures pursuing a meal.

The deputy seemed to be the only one who was armed, and he was so excited that his bullets were going far wide of their mark.

"Get guns!" he was yelling orders to the others. "Get guns an' come back here as fast as you can. Shoot 'em down like they was mad dogs!"

In his excitement he had forgotten his conviction that only silver bullets would suffice to bring down werewolves, but I had no misconceptions on that score—and the thought of blazing guns in the hands of these terrified men added to my frantic fear for Dorothy. She was running straight toward the wild stampede.

"Come back, darling!" I yelled despairingly. "You'll be killed!"

In that moment Sprague almost made good my prophecy. Whirling suddenly, he fired at her, point-blank. His bullet hit her, too; I saw her stop, saw her stagger, saw blood running down one of her arms—and utter hopelessness crushed down on me as I felt the bite of that slug in my own heart.

But the deputy's bullet only stopped her for an instant. Then she was past the fleeing men, had reached the onrushing women—and pivoted in her tracks, to come tearing back with them toward the hotel. Running back to certain doom!

Half-mad with fear for her, I tried to stop her. Frantically I threw myself in her way and tried to grab her—only to have that pack of half-beasts swarm down on me. From every side their vicious claws seemed to be swiping at me, their slavering mouths snapping at me. Blindly I smashed at them with my fists, beat them out of my way—and then Dorothy's face loomed in front of me.

A face that was so transformed that I hardly recognized it! Every spark of humanity had gone out of it. Only bestial lust gleamed from her mad eyes, snarled from her open mouth as her lips curled back over her white teeth. Like the claw-barbed paws of a great cat her hooked fingers darted out at me and her nails raked my face, furrowed my cheeks with fire as I felt myself falling—going down and down into a pit of stygian blackness that closed in on me from all sides. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

Hate Gluts Itself

WHEN I came back out of that pit the blackness seemed to have been changed to blood. Blood was all over me: on my face, my hands; matted in my hair; spilled down over my clothes so that they were drenched in the congealing flood. I was weak and sick—so sick that I could hardly raise my head from the hard floor that was my pillow; and my throat ached intolerably—or what was left of it ached, for when I raised my fingers to my neck they came away covered with fresh blood from the torn and lacerated flesh.

Gradually I became aware of my surroundings. I was lying on the cold floor of a dank, stone-walled room of con-

siderable size. I seemed to be lying in one corner of it, penned off from the rest of the place, guarded only by four crouching sentinels who watched me unblinkingly. Four hunched figures with the forms of women and the attitudes of beasts. . .

And then the full horror of it flooded back to me.

Those four creatures crouching there like watchful tigresses were the savage cat-women. Their lips were stained with blood that had spattered down over their breasts, and they were slavering for more as they eyed me hungrily. They were posted there like watch-dogs, to pounce on me at the first move I made.

Anxiously I peered from one face to the other, but Dorothy was not among them. Then warily I raised my head, little by little, until I could see beyond them—and a film of cold sweat broke out all over me!

In the center of that underground chamber was a white hospital table, presided over by the mad surgeon whom I had already watched at work—but now the victim stretched out helplessly before him was Dorothy. Sanity had come back into her eyes—sanity and terrible, brain-torturing fear. Pitiful moans of terror sobbed from her motionless lips as she stared up into his gauze-masked face—and the inhuman devil chuckled.

Deliberately he ran his finger like a pencil zigzagging up and down her naked body, and strangled shrieks of pain gushed up from her tautly stretched, tightly imprisoned lips as her flesh flinched away from his touch as if the digit were a redhot poker.

"Hurts, doesn't it?" he leaned over her face. "That is because I have reorganized your nervous system and increased the sensitivity of your pain nerves so that every spot on your body is aquiver, ready to shriek with agony at the slightest touch. Somewhat painful, but a necessary step in the process of reducing you to the physical and mental status of an animal."

Now I understood Dorothy's peculiar behavior; why she could not stand a shred of clothing on her body. This mad fiend had cloaked her in livid agony. But now he was raising a glass container from a shelf beneath the table—and the cold sweat came out in streams on my forehead as I recognized the culture with its bristling crop of hairs.

"I see that you know what these are," he chuckled as he held the glass up so that she could see it. "Soon I'll have eight of them transplanted into your upper lip—eight of the finest whiskers that any lord of the jungle would be proud to own. You are almost an animal now, but when these feelers take root in your nervous system the metamorphosis will be complete—"

As he spoke he picked up a gleaming bladed lancet and bent over her—and I could keep silent no longer. Those human cats fairly bristled at the sound of my voice—but nothing mattered now but what that fiend was about to do to my helpless wife.

"In God's name, stop that, Oliphant!" I begged. "Dorothy never harmed you. You've already murdered her sister's mind—don't do the same to her. Let her go, Oliphant—let her up from that table and I'll take her place there. You can put me through any of your hellish experiments if only you will free Dorothy—"

For a moment the gauze-masked face turned in my direction, and a mocking laugh came from behind it.

"Patient—just be patient; your turn is coming," he gibed. "Just as soon as I am finished here you will have the table—"

And the needle-pointed knife went down, jabbed delicately into Dorothy's upper lip. I saw a drop of red blood well up out of the wound. All thought of my own danger blotted out of my mind. I

wanted to get my hands on the throat of that murdering devil—and a hundred of his hell-spawned cat-women could not stop me.

"Oliphant!" I yelled wildly as I lurched to my feet. A phenomenon even more enervating than those fearful creatures rose to check me, to hold me back just as I was about to fling myself past them.

As if my shouting his name had conjured him up out of the stone floor, a dirty, bloodstained figure at the other side of the cellar staggered to his feet—a figure that was, incredibly, Melvin Oliphant!

BLOOD was running down into his face from a gash in his skull, and his skin was the color of a fish's belly. A ghastly, contorted mask of a face with wild eyes gleaming out of it as he snarled with inarticulate rage and fairly threw himself at the white-uniformed monster who should have been he.

Things happened with lightning speed in the next few fragmentary seconds. The man in the surgeon's uniform whirled and raised his scalpel to use it as a weapon, but before he could stab down with it those four snarling cat-furies sprang at Oliphant and bore him to the floor.

That was all the opportunity I needed; the seemingly impossible break for which I had been praying. Instantly I catapulted myself at the white-clad demon and grasped the handle of that deadly knife with fingers that would not be denied. If he had not relinquished his hold on it I think the tremendous strength that flowed through me at that moment would have enabled me to crush and splinter the bones of his hand.

But he did let go—and then the needle point was pressing against the back of his neck; pressing so insistently that a thin stream of blood began to flow down into his collar.

"Call off those creatures!" I grated into his ear. "Call them off—or I'll jab this thing clear through the other side of your neck!"

The fellow had nerve; for a moment he just stood there—but when the lancet point sank deeper into his neck he knew that he was licked. Low animal sounds came from his lips—sounds that caught the creatures' attention and made them hesitate. Then a short whip flashed out from beneath his coat and cracked warningly as he snapped it over their heads.

That was effective. The half-cats slunk away from their victim, sidled back to the wall and rubbed their naked bodies against it as their slitted eyes never left those of their master—but in his anxiety to placate me and ease the pain of the lancet that was sheathing in the back of his neck the murdering fiend overreached himself. The swinging of his arm jarred the gauze mask loose so that it slipped down over his chin.

"Walter Conklin—my criminal assistant!" Dr. Oliphant gasped as he staggered back to his feet and stared at the unmasked face; and then again, as if the name were unbelievable, unthinkable, "Walter . . . Conklin!"

"Yes—Walter Conklin," bitter corroboration spat from the fellow's grim lips. "Walter Conklin, who went to prison for the operation that made an incurable maniac of Henrietta Dunham. You thought I was safely stowed away in the penitentiary for the rest of my life, didn't you, doctor? You forgot that there are such things as pardons that can be arranged—if a man wants to come back and square up his accounts badly enough; if he thinks of nothing for long years but the day when he will return and settle with the man who betrayed him.

"That's what you did, Oliphant!" his low, deliberate words fairly dripped with vitriol. "You were hand in glove with me on that operation. True, your hand didn't wield the knife; you weren't even there

to see it performed—but you knew that I was undertaking it. You were just as anxious as I to know how it would turn out. You were just as guilty as I—but you played innocent; you saved your own skin and let me take the rap—let me rot in jail while you went scot-free. You—"

But Walter Conklin's recriminations didn't interest me. Obviously, the man had fed upon his hatred so long that he was half-mad. But that disordered genius-brain held the secret of Dorothy's salvation. Only he knew what could be done to bring her back from the animal darkness into which he had thrust her.

"Enough of that," I snapped, and the lancet jabbed deeper to give emphasis to my commands. "If you value your rotten life you better speak fast. I know what you've done to my wife—now I want to know how to undo your deviltry. There must be an antidote that will counteract the effect of the drugs you injected into her. Where is it?"

Cringing away from that punishing knife-point that followed him inexorably, Conklin walked to a wall cabinet at the side of the room, pulled out a drawer and pointed to several little glass vials filled with a greenish mixture. Dorothy's sanity—her very life—lay in those fragile containers! Without the mixture they contained she was doomed to a ghastly living death, shut away in a place worse than a prison. . . .

The priceless value of those few ounces of liquid disarmed me. In my feverish anxiety to snatch her from the grisly doom that was already upon her I became careless. Eagerly I reached for one of the vials—and reeled back blindly as Conklin's whip suddenly lashed across my eyes!

UNHEEDED the scalpel dropped from my fingers and fell to the floor as I pressed my hands to my agonized eyeballs. Contemptuously Conklin knocked me out of his way, sent me stumbling back blindly against one of the stone walls.

"Oh, no—you're not getting away from me as easily as that, my dear doctor," I heard him sneer at Oliphant. "After all the years I've waited I couldn't let this young fool blunder and cheat me out of my accounting. You're going to pay for every one of those years I spent in jail, Oliphant. I'm going to make a far worse thing than a life prisoner of you. Just as soon as I'm finished with your niece I'm going to give you a dose of the same medicine.

"You were always interested in experiments, doctor. Now you'll have a chance to record your own reactions as you turn into a beast—a bestial killer who will be loosed on the town, to be hunted down and exterminated by your aroused neighbors!"

My stinging eyes were watering so that I could hardly see, but I blinked the tears out of them and stared around that inferno of a room looking for I have no idea what. Escape? I had given up any such hope. Help? I knew that there was none I could possibly expect. There was *nothing* that would be of any use, and yet such was my desperation that I looked.

And then I looked again—blinked my eyes unbelievingly to be sure that what I saw was not only a heart-breaking mirage.

From where Conklin had hurled me I could see into a doorway on the other side and near the far end of the room—an archway of stone with someone standing back in the shadow so that he could watch what was going on in the cellar room. There was something familiar about that indistinct figure; something thrillingly familiar—and when Conklin bumped against the powerful droplight that shone down on the table and set it swinging so that its illumination flashed for an in-

stant into that well of darkness I knew!

The watcher was Stuart Hurley — Stuart miraculously saved from the cat-women who had downed him; Stuart waiting there for an opportunity to leap out and save us!

But there was no more time to wait! Conklin had another keen-bladed knife in his hand; he was bending once more over Dorothy, pricking the point into her lip! I was terribly weak and dizzy, and those cat creatures were again watching me as if I were a mouse—but that awful blade *had to be stopped!*

"Stuart!" I screamed wildly. "Stop him, Stuart! Stop—"

Frenziedly I tried to throw myself at Conklin—only to be met by the smash of his solid fist that thudded me back against the wall in a quivering heap. Surely Stuart must have understood that I was only making a desperate bluff, creating a diversion in order to give him his opportunity—but instead of leaping at Conklin's back he had stepped out from under the archway, had walked out into the cellar and stood there with a grin on his face that sent a spasm of icy fear through my last hope.

Stuart was grinning at me malevolently! His eyes were alight with triumph, with evil gloating that he made no effort to conceal!

"Stuart!" gasped from my lips. "Stuart—you—you—"

"You guessed it, Gordon," he sneered in my face. "I'm the boss here—the master-mind and all that sort of thing. Yes, I know—you had no suspicion of me at all. You thought I was just a good-natured sucker who could be kicked in the face and would forget about it—just the way Oliphant and his nieces thought. I wasn't good enough for Mildred; they turned thumbs down on me and gave her to Earl Richmond—but that was the biggest mistake they ever made.

"I loved Mildred then—but love is very close to hate; and I can hate better than any man you ever knew. You can thank me for the way Richmond went to the dogs; he did that under my very special supervision and direction—so that I could make my re-entry as the good old faithful doormat of a friend. You can thank me, too, for the peculiar ailment that came over Mildred and necessitated sending her out here to Windover. I poisoned her mind with drugs so that I could stage this lovely family reunion and have all the members on hand."

"But Conklin—" Melvin Oliphant's voice croaked the question that was in my own mind.

THIS all sounded incredible. I couldn't believe it, even though Stuart stood there and gloatingly confessed it. Perhaps, I told myself, Walter Conklin had gotten control of his mind; had hypnotized him or dominated him so that he didn't know what he was saying. . . .

"I knew all about Oliphant's old trouble," the man I had considered one of my best friends quickly shattered that feeble, despairing hope, "so when I started out to make him pay for snatching the girl who should have been my wife out of my arms I looked up Walter Conklin. Once I located him in prison I knew I had the weapon I needed to handle Oliphant. I was the one who secured Conklin's pardon—after he had sworn to follow my orders implicitly and join the revenge he craved with my own plans."

Madness is a fearfully contagious thing, I thought as I looked into Stuart's rage-blotched face. He had dabbled with it, had given it to others—and in the doing he had been consumed by it himself.

The cancerous hatred that he had nursed so long had warped his brain; had made him a creature as pitiful as those cat-women as he stood there delighting in the opportunity to mouth an account of his own villainy.

"You are in the sub-cellar of the hotel, where Dr. Conklin has been running his own little sanitarium ever since I bought the place from Ross Morgan and saved him from going to jail," Stuart gloried in his own cleverness. "I don't believe in throwing money away, even to repay the Oliphants for what they did to me—so don't fear that I'll lose anything by that transaction. The publicity this cat-woman terror is getting all over the country will put Windover on the map. Just as soon as the terror is safely over, curious sightseers will be flocking here by the thousands—Windover will be established as a vacation resort; prosperity will again come—"

"And when we are all killed off you'll buy in the doctor's sanitarium for a song and will have a vacation layout that will make you a fortune," I contributed the moment he seemed about to stop.

If only I could keep him talking there might still be a bare shadow of hope. So long as his mind was occupied with his own foul schemes he would not notice that Oliphant, who seemed to have lapsed into unconsciousness on the floor, was moving with a stealth that would have rivaled any cat's—moving toward where the lancet I had dropped lay unnoticed against the wall.

"Exactly!" Stuart grinned. "Your perception is improving, Gordon. The law business hasn't been so lucrative lately, but thanks to the cooperation of you and your family I'll soon be independent of it. All right, professor," he turned to Conklin, "let's get on with the work—"

From the corner of my eyes I saw Oliphant's fingers close around the scalpel, saw his body arch as he tensed his muscles—and with a silent prayer for strength I set myself for a last desperate gamble.

Without a sound the doctor sprang to his feet—sprang into the air with the scalpel lifted over his head; and then he seemed to collapse, seemed to be folding up, every last ounce of strength gone out of him. The weight of his falling body was what guided the deadly knife—to plunge into Conklin's upper abdomen as he whirled in alarm that came too late. Oliphant's weight drew the blade down, slicing deep through the man's stomach. laying his body open right down to the crotch.

That ghastly sight I glimpsed in the wink of an eye as I threw myself at Stuart, clutched for him wildly, and felt my arms closing around his kness in a grip that I was resolved not to relinquish while there was a breath of life left in me. Down we went onto the floor, to roll and pitch there while he pounded at my head and the back of my neck, savagely determined to beat the senses out of me or smash my skull.

Those moments of agony seemed like centuries. Helpless to free a hand to battle with him, I could only cling to my grip; could only keep him imprisoned so that he could not go to Conklin's aid. And that was all I needed to do, for help came to me from a most unexpected quarter.

The sight of Conklin's gushing blood seemed to set those cat-women wild. Instantly they sensed that his domination over them was gone—and simultaneously they reacted to it. With snarling cries of satisfaction they leaped upon him—and their tawny bodies became crimson, dyed in his blood.

LIKE cats worrying the lifeless bodies of mice they seized upon him and Oliphant, to shake them in the air and batter them down on the floor; to rip them and tear them until what was left was scarcely recognizable as human. I don't know whether Dr. Oliphant died in their hands; I prefer to think that he was dead before the knife in his hand completed its task of disemboweling Wal-

ter Conklin—but it took no second glance to tell me that there was no spark of life left in the battered wreck those maddened creatures pawed and mauled.

"That's the end of Conklin," I panted as I clung to Hurley. "And you're going to be next."

There was stark terror in his face, I saw when I twisted my head so that I could look up at him; terror that made him struggle like a wild man to break away from me. But in that instant I saw something else, too. Conklin's whip had dropped from his lifeless hand and lay in a pool of his own blood—lay little more than a yard from me. . . .

To relinquish my grip on Hurley even for a second might be disastrous; I knew that—but there was nothing I could do but leap desperately for that whip. Hurley was almost on his feet before my fingers closed on it. His foot was swinging at my head in a kick that would have shattered my skull had it landed—but in that moment the loaded butt of the whip came down over his skull and he staggered backward, to tumble head over heels into the gory shambles that closed over him.

Somehow I staggered to my feet and groped my way to the table on which Dorothy was strapped. Somehow I managed to get those straps unbuckled, managed to get her to a sitting posture, and then onto her feet. The terror she had been through seemed to have half-rationalized her, and before she could resist I had her mouth open and had forced the contents of one of those antidote vials down her throat.

With Conklin's whip ready in my hand I led the way to the door through which Stuart Hurley had come, but I had no need for the whip. Those maddened cat-creatures were too absorbed with their hellish business; too intent on rending Hurley limb from limb to notice that we were escaping until we were through the door and it had closed behind us.

They were still there in their underground prison when the sheriff, who had been summoned from the county seat, ventured down the stairs and tossed a gas bomb through the archway. Five minutes later they were unconscious when they were carried out and placed in waiting cars to be sped off to a hospital and eventual cure.

That was the last of the cat-women. The terror passed and Windover forgot them. But they will live on forever in the recesses of my memory. Frequently even now, when I glimpse the unadorned loveliness of my wife's body, a cold chill trickles down my spine and I can see her cringing away from me with the lithe grace of a cat—until her soft arms slip around my neck and draw me to her, to assure me again that all that ghastly horror is a thing of the dimming past.

THE END

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A MONSTER SEEKS MY HEART

By E. G. Morris

Sally—that twisted, dwarfed fragment of humanity, knew she could never win my love as long as I loved a normal, beautiful woman. I realized that when I was powerless, held in terror's icy grip, while Sally gleefully prepared to make my fiancée's body match her own! . . .

"AND now, ladies and gen'lemen!" The barker paused for dramatic effect. "I am going to give you a treat. You don't have to spend one dime, not even two nickles. I am going to introduce you to the prize package of our show, the greatest show on earth. I want you to meet Sally!"

He stuck out his hand toward the rear of the platform and out minced a little creature hideously, weirdly ugly. I could not tell what it was, man or woman, beast or human being. It was the spawn of some monstrous, glandular disturbance, that much was certain. The head came up to a point, and was topped with a skimpy knot

of hair. The eyes were slits, the mouth a little wizened circle in the greyish face.

How the barker could stand there with one arm around this hideous creature's neck, while it looked up at him, grinning and mouthing half-words, was more than I could understand. All my life I had had a horror of the abnormal, of anything grotesque. That was one reason I had hated to come to Coney Island today; it was the reason I touched Marion's arm and whispered, "Come on, you don't want to see any of this stuff, do you?"

But she was watching the pitiful little monstrosity as though fascinated. Her grey eyes stared at the shrivelled face, and her red lips were half parted with her rapid breathing.

Again I was aware of the strident tones of the barker's voice.

"Sally, do you see any young man out there you'd like for a sweetheart?"

The horrible figure hunched its shoulders so that its head swiveled around as it peered out into the milling, laughing crowd. And suddenly, with the certainty of utter horror, I *knew* that it was going to point to me. . . .

Slowly the skinny arm with the oversize club-like hand at the end of it was raised. A finger pointed in my direction. I could feel the rapid beat of my heart, could feel it pounding in my throat as if to choke me. . . .

"Come on, Marion," I muttered. I tugged at her arm.

"Jack!" There was disappointment in her tone. "The poor little thing. It's all just an act. Don't be silly."

I felt myself being pushed up through the crowd. I was standing now near the platform. The creature's hand was near mine.

The barker laughed. "Shake hands with your new boy friend, Sally," he grinned.

I felt my unresisting hand being squeezed by the moist, bulbous fingers of that poor freak of nature. I knew that I should have felt sorry for this thing—man, woman, beast, or whatever it really was—but I couldn't. My only feeling was one of loathing—and helplessness. I felt as though I were an automaton of fate, with no volition of my own.

I breathed a great sigh of relief when my hand was released. And for a moment it seemed that the crowd was strangely silent. . . .

Once again the barker leaned forward. Did I catch a note of jeering in his voice? He looked at me, his lips curled. But he spoke to the thing up there on the platform. "Don't you want to give your boy friend a great big kiss?"

I drew back just as the creature leaned far out, nearly toppling from the platform. Its lips were puckered, and it made animal-like chirping noises as it blew kisses into the air. Amid the laughter of the crowd I pushed my way back to Marion. I took off my panama and wiped sweat from my forehead.

This time she did not hang back as I pulled her away from the freak show. For a while neither of us spoke.

I TRIED to have a good time the rest of that evening but I could not get the picture of that pitiful, yet odious face out of my mind. I had especially wanted to make this a gala night, for it was Marion's first trip to New York and I had so much wanted her to enjoy herself. When her brother George had suggested that I take her to Coney Island while he finished up some work, I had felt like kicking him, but her little squeals of delight had made me realize what a child she was, and how much it would mean to her. And as the evening went on I began to realize how much she meant to me. I was rapidly falling in love.

I had worked with George Watson for five years, and in all that time he had never mentioned a sister to me. Then, this night, he had casually brought her

around to my apartment and asked me to "show her New York."

I had nearly forgotten the side-show by the time Marion and I were on a subway train bound for Manhattan. But just as we were pulling out of the Atlantic Avenue Station she touched my arm.

"Isn't that a strange looking object, over there!" she whispered. I looked in the direction of her nod. Sitting on one of the side seats, hunched up in the corner, was a small figure dressed in black, although it was August. It seemed to be a woman, but the feet were tremendous, and one hand, resting in the lap, showed great, blunted fingers; the nails mere slits at the end of each one. Its face was entirely hidden by a thick veil.

I knew what it was. I cannot express the panic which hammered at my brain. There was no reason for it, but I somehow sensed that this creature was following me. I had an unreasoning desire to get up and rush out of the car, but common sense forbade my doing it. I did start to ask Marion if she would mind going into the far end of the car, but I could think of no rational excuse to give. Anyway, she seemed to have lost all interest in the strange figure, and was busily watching a couple of drunks who were trying to sing.

I glanced again at the creature, some power seeming to pull my eyes in that direction. There was a fascination about my fear and repulsion, and as though it sensed this, the little creature slowly raised the corner of its veil. The gesture was horrible, a grotesque travesty of coquettishness . . . I could see the pursed lips and the wrinkled, grey face. And the lumpish hand holding the veil seemed enormous and beastly.

I do not know what excuse I made to Marion. I only know that somehow I managed to get her to move to another part of the car. Even then I was afraid that the thing would follow us, but I was aware of any movement, and I deliberately refrained from looking around.

I talked, talked rapidly, trying to drown my own insane thoughts and the futile fear that mastered me. I talked about George, about our work together. About this wonderful research ability. I told Marion how near our plans were to success, and how much it would mean to me. I think I even hinted at how much it could mean to her, and to my delighted surprise she smiled and didn't seem too shocked at my sudden declarations.

George lived at a hotel on Forty-Third Street and my apartment was just two blocks east. Marion and I got off the train at Times Square, and as we walked up the long incline I turned around. I saw no sign of the creature in black.

I left Marion in the lobby of her hotel and walked east on Forty-Third Street. I couldn't get the memory of that silly coincidence out of my thoughts. I couldn't overcome the feeling of abhorrence aroused in me by the touch of that pitiful little freak, and as I walked the long block from Sixth Avenue to Fifth I could not help glancing over my shoulder every few steps. But aside from a few casual pedestrians I was alone on the block. It was early morning and the Avenue was deserted. My footsteps echoed hollowly as I swung across the street. . . .

Then suddenly I heard a quicker footstep than my own. It was coming closer, as though something were running behind me. I looked back, and there, just coming into the nimbus of light cast by the lamp on the corner, I saw the little creature in black. Pattering along, it held its skirts in one horrible hand, and even from this distance I could see that the veil was drawn back, that the thing was grinning. . . .

I FELT wrapped in the ghastly fabric of nightmare unreality, but somehow I managed to get my feet moving. My

throat was too constricted to yell . . . But I ran, with the sound of my own breathing nearly drowning out the sound of those dreadful pattering footbeats behind me. Then I was in my apartment lobby, and I swung the door shut behind me, heard the lock click with a blessed feeling of safety. Almost immediately a soft form bounced against the glass door, and standing there in the thrall of some nameless fascination of horror I saw the distorted face pressed up against the glass, the eyes leering, the mouth making kissing noises.

I ran my tongue across dry lips, lips that were coated as though I had been through a siege of fever. It was all I could do to get up the stairs to my apartment. Despite the fact that nothing had come in with me, I clicked on the light in my hall the moment I got inside. I was panting as I walked to my living room, where I fumblingly switched on the lamp and sank down into an easy chair. I could have faced a machine gun with far less panic than that hideous little deformed thing raised in my chest. I shook my head, blew through half closed lips and looked up. And sitting on my divan, across the room from me, was the thing which I had just seen at the downstairs door! It was impossible for it to have got into my apartment ahead of me! Yet there it sat, its veil drawn back from its odious mockery of a face, its arms held out toward me.

For one second I was incapable of any sound, of any movement at all. For another second the last vestiges of reason told me that I must be having an hallucination—that the thing simply could not have got in this way. I remember that I put one hand out toward it, as though to tell it to vanish . . . it got up slowly from the divan and minced toward me.

I must have gone a little crazy then. I remember screaming, and I remember getting my hands on the creature's throat.

I know I shuddered as I touched the flesh . . . then there was an abrupt vivid explosion inside my brain. For half a second everything was very bright, but the floor suddenly flew up against my face and I felt the world disappear.

When I opened my eyes my first feeling was one of pain in my arms and legs. My next sensation was bewilderment as to where I was and what had happened. Then I saw that I was on the floor of my own living room, and that the pain was due to the cords from my window drapes which had been used to tie my wrists and ankles securely.

In the grip of renewed horror I tossed my head from side to side like a wounded animal, strained my arms and legs in a panic of resistance. I could see no sign of my frightful visitor. Then I became aware of something else. My doorbell was ringing, ringing furiously. If I could just get to that door! I tried to arch my back and propel my weight across the floor in crab-like fashion, but it was no use. The best I could manage was to bruise my chin and start my head aching all over again. Suddenly there was the patter of footsteps from the direction of the bathroom. Lying on my back, my eyes wide, I watched impotently while the creature came out of my bathroom. The veil was gone now, but as decoration it had rouged its lips and painted great spots of red on each cheek. The heavy, lashless lids were daubed with mascara, and the total effect was even more grotesque than before.

It is impossible to describe the fashion in which it came toward me. Its head on one side, the lips were held in a silly pout, the eyes screwed up into what the poor creature seemed to think was a seductive glance. I can tell you that if there had been any way for me to die at that moment I should have died gladly. As it was, the utter revulsion I felt as the creature bent over me, as it pressed those hideous rouged lips against my face, made everything go black for a blessed moment.

AS MY brain cleared I heard the monstrosity giggling, saw it dancing around the room. I remember that even then I was still wondering, with one little section of my brain, how it could have got into my apartment, but I forgot everything as I saw it run over and press the button which would open the outside door. Why it was doing so I could not imagine, for thus it was offering me a chance for escape—or rescue!

Almost immediately I saw how mistaken I had been. There was the sound of footsteps outside of my door, and as my horrid visitor opened the door two persons rushed in, or, rather, one person and another of these freaks. For there was another! An exact replica of the gibbering thing which danced around at my door! The first one threw its stuffed arms around the shoulders of its twin, pulling back the veil from the twin's face and slobbering over it in an ecstasy of affection.

I managed to turn my head, straining to raise my bound arms and wipe my sleeves against my own face. It was then that I saw my hands.

What is the remarkable hold on sanity which we possess? A hold that can keep a world from jerking into madness when horror routs reason and the brain is an inferno of fear? My hands were almost exactly like those of the creatures who peered at me, my fingers clubbed, the nails mere slits, the skin already grey and unhealthy-looking.

Aware of whispering at the door I saw that my visitors seemed to ignore me. One of the twins, the one which still had on the hat and veil, was whispering sibilantly to the man who had come in with it. A man with his hat pulled well down over his forehead, and with a black mask on his face. If it had not been for my horror I could have laughed at the melodrama of the situation—but there was no laughter in my heart.

The painted twin continued to dance up and down, making the little guttural noises. And now the sound of the horrible whispering was shattered as the bell rang again.

Despite the unbearable significance of my changing hands, a candle of hope was lighted in my heart. It might be George. Possibly Marion had told him of my experience. Possibly it was the police—some neighbor may have been disturbed and called them—possibly—but the man at the door had motioned the little creatures away from him, was turning out the lights . . . Then he pressed the buzzer.

I managed to start one hoarse shout before bulbous, amazingly strong fingers pressed against my mouth, nearly suffocating me. Twist and squirm as I might, it was hardly possible to breathe, much less to utter a sound.

But I had heard, above the hurried knocking at my door, a woman's voice calling, "Jack, Jack!" I struggled frantically, twisting and turning my head, nearly wrenching my neck in my efforts to scream—not to scream for help, but to scream a warning. For the voice was Marion's!

I must have managed to make some noise at last, for the knocking ceased and Marion's voice asked, breathlessly, "Jack! What is it, what's the matter?"

My door was suddenly flung open, admitting a little light from the hall, and in that light I saw the masked man dragging Marion into the room. He had one hand across her face and I could hear her choked attempts to cry out. The lights flicked on.

Marion was facing me and as she caught sight of me on the floor her expression changed—changed from fear, from desperation, to incredible loathing. I saw her eyes roll, saw the whites of them and knew she was going to faint. She slumped down in the arms of the man who held her.

CALLOUSLY he let her body drop to the floor, came over and stood above me. There was something familiar about him, something that hinted of a past acquaintance, but I was more than tired and half insane from fright and horror. A dull feeling was spreading through my head; my limbs felt heavy. Everything seemed dim, as though indeed I was held in thrall by a nightmare, a nightmare in which everything was undergoing a creeping, relentless change. . . .

I must have had a degree of the normal left in me for as I saw the little twin tearing the blouse from Marion's white, round breast I managed to scream a wordless warning. The man standing above me whirled around. He shook his head, as one might who watched a mischievous child, and walked over toward Marion. By this time the creature had ripped off her clothing, exposing her firm young breasts, and was holding the clothes aloft in one misshapen hand.

If only I could throw off the lethargy coursing through my veins! I could feel that the freak squatting by me had lost all interest in me, was watching the masked man as he walked toward the creature gibbering and pointing to Marion.

Like an undercurrent through all the terror in my brain I could feel the sense of revulsion that I, too, was becoming one of these things. I felt unclean, as if something in me were defiled, rotting . . . with every whit of will power I still possessed I fought against this self-loathing.

One persistent question hammered at my consciousness. What had been done to me? Surely the kiss of that little monster which now danced up and down by Marion's body, however uncannily ugly it was, could not have caused this condition. The next moment I had my answer!

The man was bending over Marion—had taken a hypodermic syringe from his pocket and had one of Marion's smooth rounded arms raised. The needle came closer to that white flesh. I looked at my own grey, scabby fingers and I screamed, a loud, throaty scream.

The man whirled about, and at that instant the little creature stopped its dancing and reached for the hand holding the hypo.

I sensed the tenseness of the other twin at my side. The room was strangely silent for a second and I knew somehow that this dreadful night had reached a climax.

The masked man felt the painted twin's hand against his, glanced at it quickly and saw that the thing was reaching for the needle as a child might reach for a toy.

With a vicious snarl he swung the flat of one great hand. It met its object with the crack of a pistol. The little twin's color-daubed face was flattened by the blow and the little body spun across the foyer, landed against the wall with a sickening thud.

Without a glance in that direction the man bent over Marion again. I could see that his neck above his collar was an angry red. I realized that the man was insane with hatred. This time the needle was pointed straight for her left breast. I shut my eyes.

Then the malformed dwarf at my side moved. It moved quickly, silently it sprang upon the shoulders of the man who bent over Marion. The force of the impact knocked the masked man off balance, and like swollen snakes the creature's two clubbed hands fastened around the man's neck.

I had an idea of the strength of those hideous hands. My lips were sore and bruised where they had been pressed by the same fingers now buried in the flesh of the man who had slapped the other twin.

UNRELENTINGLY the vile fingers pressed. I tried to shut my eyes but my gaze was held in unwilling fascina-

tion by the scene. The beautiful blonde girl, lying unconscious and half naked, the powerful, masked man struggling and writhing on the floor with the potent fingers of the little monster pressing away the life from his body; and there against the wall, the broken body of the weaker twin.

Suddenly the man stiffened as in a spasm, then grew limp. The little creature sighed, released its hold and the man's head hit the floor with a thud. The creature reached into the man's pocket, pulled out another syringe, looked at it and nodded as though satisfied. It bent down and removed the first needle from the unresisting fingers. It laid this needle on the floor and now it came over toward me, the new syringe held expertly in the clubbed fingers. I was sure that if this monster didn't kill me, the pounding of my heart would; each beat racked my body until I felt as though the walls of my chest would burst asunder.

The horrible face came close to mine, the hand with the scaly fingers, so much like my own fingers now, tore at my shirt, ripped it open.

With a last feeble effort I tried to jerk my body aside.

"You fool," hissed the creature, and its voice was surprisingly clear, unlike the gibbering voice of its twin. "This is the antidote." I felt the sharp prick of the needle in my chest, and for the second time that night I lost all sense of the real world.

I must have been out only a moment, for when I regained my senses the little thing was cutting the bonds from my legs, and as it cut it talked.

"I had no idea he meant to carry the thing this far," there was a note of pleading in the voice, as though the creature begged forgiveness. This was a man's voice, and I realized that whatever the other creature had been, this one was merely a poor human laughed at by nature, a pitiful creature doomed to be a freak because of some ill-functioning gland.

It cut the bonds at my wrists and stood back. It seemed to have no fear of me, and remembering my own weakened condition and the strength of those clubbed hands I did not wonder.

I staggered to my feet. Instead of going over to Marion I zigsawed into the bathroom. I had to see my face. When I looked into the mirror I nearly cried aloud. My eyes had narrowed and become a muddy color. The gland in my throat was twice its normal size and the hand I put up to that gland was clubbed and deformed.

I was aware of the creature standing in the doorway behind me, and as I turned and looked at it I saw that the tiny, muddy eyes showed, not malignity, as I would have expected, but a deep and abiding pity.

"Don't worry," said the clear voice—a voice that reminded me strongly of another voice so familiar to me. "You got the antidote in plenty of time. Look! Your hands are already turning back to normal. Have no fear, you won't be—like me!" I wish I could express the sorrow in that voice.

Without another word it left the room, and I reached the living room just in time to see that it had picked up the hypo from the floor and was injecting something into the figure of the masked man, sprawled out on the rug.

"Let him see how it feels, the rat!" The creature straightened up and walked over toward its twin. One glance was sufficient to show that the little freak was dead, and somehow in death its misshapen face wore a strange aura of dignity. The little, puffed lips were smiling, like those of a child.

He who had saved me gathered the body of his twin up in his arms, rocked it to and fro, moaning. At intervals he

cast glances at the man unconscious on the floor.

SOMEHOW I was no longer afraid, and strangely enough, I was no longer repulsed by these tragic little creatures. I walked over and looked down at Marion. With infinite relief I saw that she was breathing evenly, that color was stealing back into her cheeks. I realized that the little man was standing by me.

"Don't worry," he whispered, "she will be all right. But one minute more—" he shook his head.

I saw that he was looking at the pitiful little dead freak laid out on the divan. There were tears in his strange eyes. Then he looked down at the man on the floor, and to my horror I saw that already the fingers were beginning to thicken, the face was growing distorted.

I think if there had been any way to help the man I should have done so, despite the frightful thing he had attempted. But as though he read my mind the little creature stepped quickly to the window, raised it, and threw both hypodermic syringes far out into the street. He did not face me again until he had heard the tinkle of the glass below.

"Take off the mask, while there is still time to recognize—your *friend!*" He accented the last words.

With a strange feeling of certainty in my mind I bent over the figure on the floor. I yanked off the mask and looked into George Watson's face—a face that seemed to be changing, thickening and growing grotesque under my very eyes!

The dwarf shook his head. "A great man," his voice held infinite contempt. "A great chemist, a low scoundrel, and—my brother!"

I straightened up and faced the speaker. He nodded, musingly.

"There were three children in our family. One normal—physically normal, at least—and myself, and—and—" he looked at the broken body on the divan—"my twin sister."

"Let me tell you all of it before she wakes up." He pointed to Marion, and he must have seen the query in my eyes. "Oh, no!" His head shook negatively. "She is no relation, poor kid. She thought it was all a prank. She was down and out, and George met her out at the Island and gave her a hundred dollars for her part in the 'joke' on a college chum. But during the few hours she spent with you she learned to love you—" He looked up quickly, continued, "I, who am forever doomed to be laughed at, to be repulsive—can recognize love in others.

"Suffice it to say that my little twin sister and I were born, doomed to be as you see us. Our father was a great doctor. He kept our very existence secret, secret even from the brother who lies there before you." He pointed to George Watson. "And all the time, constantly, he sought some means to cure us. He devoted his whole life to that endeavor. Well, he failed! But he did discover a glandular extract which could produce the same condition or a kindred condition in a normal person. He got that far, and as far as an antidote which was efficacious if given in time." He paused, and pointed to my own hands, to my face. "See, you are almost completely recovered.

"But," he went on, "the antidote has no effect on natural cases, or even on cases of injected poison after a few hours. Well, before my father died he told George all about us. George was a great chemist, as great a chemist as my father had been, but he lacked one thing. A human heart. After the death of my father, we were penniless. How could two freakish creatures like us earn a living? Only in one way! God help us, George put us in a side-show. The major portion of the money he drew went to him. What need had we for money? Where could we go to spend it?

"Then he got into business with you. Your invention is nearing completion—George had done some of the chemical research, it is true—but he wanted all the profits. He persuaded you to draw up an insurance agreement with him. If one of you died, the other was to get everything. But George was too cagey to stage a murder. He decided to make you into a creature like us—to have you, the you that anyone could ever recognize, disappear. That was his plan for tonight.

"AS FOR us, little Sally and me, he promised me some money if I would help him with his joke. That is what he told me it was—a joke—and poor little Sally, he promised her a dress. She loved clothes—loved anything bright or pretty." His eyes filled with tears. Then he shook his head.

"That's the way it stood. I followed you home on the subway. Sally had already been put here in your apartment. Poor little thing, she was completely harmless—but when I got up to George's room he had to boast. He began to brag to me of the trick he had pulled—of how he had given Sally a syringe of the poison—of how he had patiently shown her that she was to use it on you and then throw it away.

Marion was in the other room. She must have heard part of what he said, and although she didn't understand it all she followed us here to warn you. You know the rest."

He stopped talking, tears running down the grey cheeks.

I saw that Marion had moved, that she was on the verge of regaining consciousness. I looked at the body of Sally, and at the thing which had once been my trusted partner, George Watson. Then I turned to the twisted gnome who had saved my life and more—Marion's.

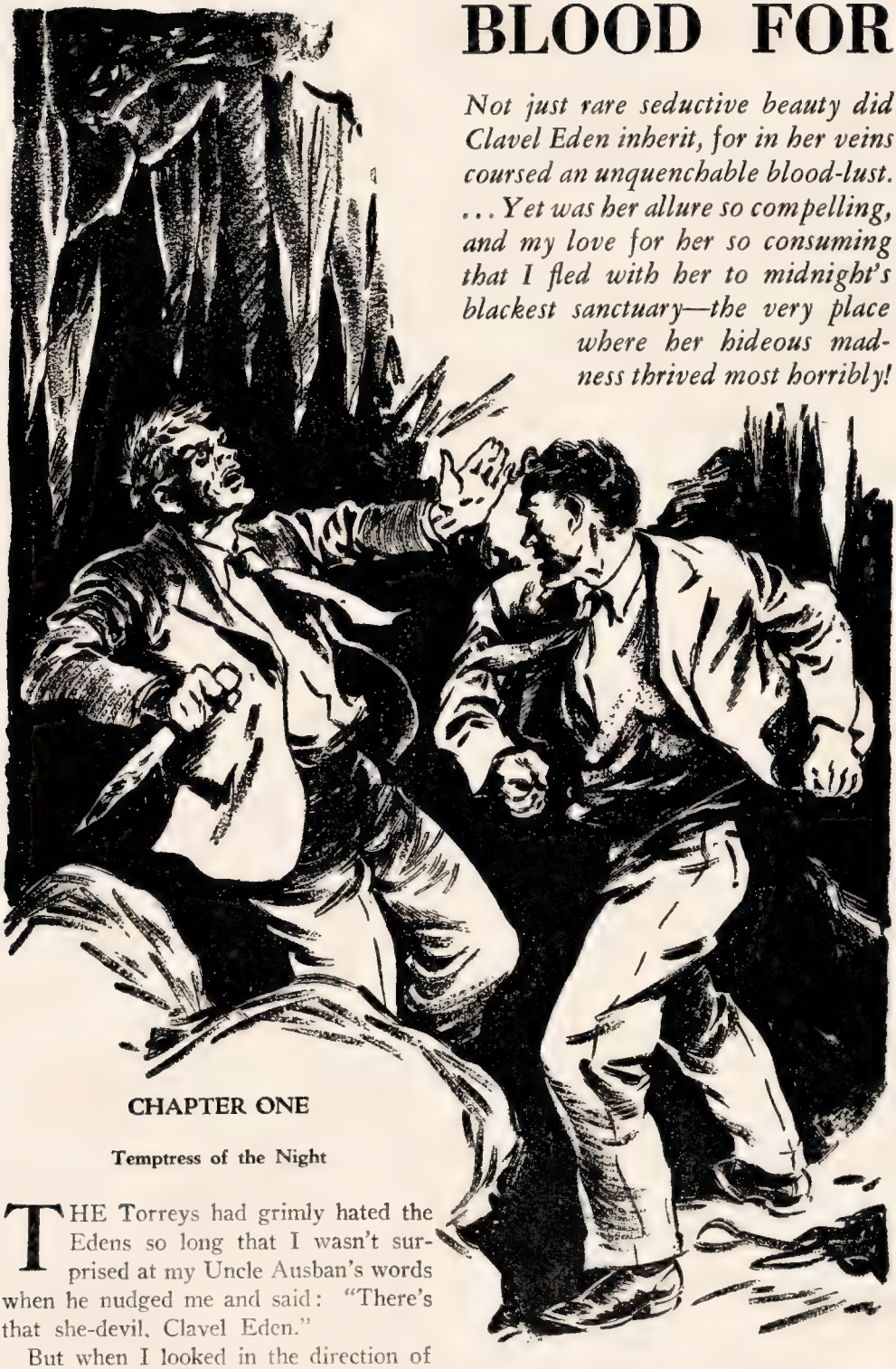
"But what can we do?" I asked. "How can we explain all this to the police?"

The little man shook his head. "Let me worry about that. You get your sweetheart out of here before she regains consciousness. Get her away from all this—" His voice broke and he did not look at me. "I will see that Sally—that Sally's body is taken care of. I have a car downstairs, George's car. He won't ever need it again," he pointed to the figure on the floor. What had been George Watson was now a horrible creature like the dead thing on my divan. His body had even shrunk . . . "I need George in my act," the little man said, and smiled. "We're billed as the 'Terrible Twins,' you see."

Before I picked up Marion's warm body to carry it out into the clean night air I held out my hand. The little creature clasped it in his own hand, and this time I felt no revulsion, only an infinite pity. . . .

BLOOD FOR

Not just rare seductive beauty did Clavel Eden inherit, for in her veins coursed an unquenchable blood-lust. . . . Yet was her allure so compelling, and my love for her so consuming that I fled with her to midnight's blackest sanctuary—the very place where her hideous madness thrived most horribly!



CHAPTER ONE

Temptress of the Night

THE Torreys had grimly hated the Edens so long that I wasn't surprised at my Uncle Ausban's words when he nudged me and said: "There's that she-devil, Clavel Eden."

But when I looked in the direction of his nod and saw her, it knocked the wind from me. I forgot at once the intense excitement that had been absorbing my thoughts—the fact that I was going down into the depths of the vastest caverns known to man to visit a scientist

THE CAVERN DWELLERS

By John H. Knox *(Author of "The Pain People," etc.)*

A Novelette of Eerie Horror in the Earth's Depths

who was making some daring experiments down there. I forgot everything except the amazing revelation that Clavel Eden, whom I dimly remembered as the tiny daughter of the hated Eden clan, was in reality the same woman I had met in El Paso less than six months ago — that strange alluring creature of the night whose mysterious beauty had awakened such powerful emotions in me, and whose weird conduct had since seemed as incredible as a dream.

I'm an oculist and I had been working late that night and had just stepped out of my office into what seemed a deserted street when — due to labor trouble — the lights all over town went out.

Instantly a woman was screaming in

the darkness somewhere near me, screaming like an animal in its death throes, and as I ran toward the sound, it subsided to a savage, spitting snarl that seemed neither animal nor human. The next instant I had collided with the woman's clawing, flailing arms, and she had slumped against me, sobbing wildly: "I'm blind . . . It's the dark, the awful dark . . ."

I laughed understandingly. "You're not blind. It's just that the lights went out. Come to my office, and I'll give you a pick-up."

Still shaking, she allowed me to pilot her inside, where I deposited her in a chair, snapped on a flash and poured a drink. Then I saw that she had fainted. I saw too, for the first time, how alluringly, indescribably beautiful she was.

Small and dark, with a lush, ripe shapeliness that was breath-taking, there was nevertheless something about her that vaguely repelled me. I couldn't analyze it, but as I faltered forward with the whiskey jigger shaking in my hand, I stopped.

My eyes had run down along the creamy line of her throat, past the shadows where her rounded breasts divided, and had focused on her waist. There, the blouse pulled loose from her skirt by the awkward slump of her body revealed a portion of naked flesh — flesh like a white rose petal, but hideously marked with ugly pinkish scars — and over those scars, encircling her waist like the symbol of some infamous bondage, a chain, an ordinary dog-chain, fastened with a tiny padlock!

It shocked me so that for an instant I couldn't move. There are strange cults in the border city. And in Juarez, across the river, there things done that are better left unmentioned. But this small, lovely girl — !

Suddenly she opened her eyes, sat up, frantic hands clawing the coat of her dark tailored suit about her. "I'm sorry," she stammered, pushing aside the drink I offerred her, "it's just that the dark . . . well, the dark terrifies me . . ."

Her eyes, refusing to meet mine, were roving furtively about the office. They came to rest on my framed diploma and I saw her start and shoot a sharp look at my face.

Then instantly she was on her feet.

"Could I borrow your flash? You've been so kind . . ."

"Of course," I said, "but can't I call a taxi, take you — ?"

"No, no, thank you." Her haste now was frantic. She almost snatched the flashlight from my hands. "I'll return it."

The next moment I was left in darkness, listening to her heels clicking on the stairs.

Later I was sorry I had let her go like that, for her image had lingered with me like a troubling perfume, teasing, tormenting with its alien suggestiveness, and the beauty and tragic terror of her face had haunted me on sleepless nights. But the flashlight had come back through the mail, and I hadn't seen her again—until now.

Clavel Eden! And she had seen my name on the diploma. And had she remembered those meetings in our lonely childhood?

WE were now moving at the end of a long line of sightseers, wending slowly toward the vaulted entrance to "The Caves of Acheron," as Huren Eden had poetically called the vast caverns he had discovered. My uncle Ausban was walking on one side of me, my sister, Lucia, on the other. Orphaned long ago, Lucia and I had been reared by our uncle Ausban, but this was the first time we had come to visit him at the old homestead since the caverns had been opened and we were both anxious to see them, particularly since there was a chance that we

might become part owners of them, if certain of Uncle Ausban's lawsuits against the Edens turned out right.

"Why do you call her a she-devil, Uncle Ausban?" Lucia asked now. "Is it just that you think all Edens are devils since they've got the caves instead of us?"

"Oh, no," Uncle Ausban replied grimly, "I mean it quite literally when I apply the term to her."

Lucia laughed, taking it for one of his Ausban was literal-minded, and there was somber jokes. But I know that Uncle something about that girl . . .

She was standing near the entrance, a thin blond young man clinging to her arm, while she talked to her cousin, Graves Eden, a bony, horse-faced youth in a guide's green uniform. What, I asked myself, was the queer disturbing quality of her beauty? She was so different, for instance, from my sister Lucia, whose beauty was clear and golden like the sunlight. Clavel Eden was the opposite; her beauty was like the night — a night with veiled stars. Dresed in black, which was scarcely distinguishable from the smoky darkness of her hair, she was somehow like a black rose — alien, exotic, alluring with a loveliness that was troubling, somehow unnatural.

Yes, *unnatural!* There had always been something unnatural about her, even as a child. My mind flew back through the years and I stood again, a tall barefoot boy of ten, on the line where the land of the Torreys and the Edens divided. And I was talking to that dark, tiny girl-child, daughter of my own clan's bitterest foes, while her old Indian nurse, Otoma, stood at a distance, hawk-eyed and watchful. I remembered how, as I stared into her pale little flower-petal face, the breeze had fluttered her skirt, revealing to the shocked gaze of a lad of ten, those thin little legs that were a mass of ugly welts with reddish centers.

"What are those?" I had asked.

And she had said, her black eyes dropping, "He does that sometimes in the dark. He pinches me—the little grey man."

It had been my first taste of impersonal horror, and I didn't want to ask her any more questions. But for months afterwards, that phrase, "the little grey man," had been enough to send shudders down my spine.

We had now come close enough to Clavel and the two young men for me to catch scraps of their conversation, and suddenly I heard her cousin Graves say: "But it'll be all right this trip, Clavel. Dad promised the lights wouldn't be turned off this time."

And there was a laugh from the blond young man, whose eyes were devouring her. "Oh, I'm not afraid of that curse stuff anyhow."

They moved in past the gates where a man was taking tickets. Lucia had heard the last remark too, and now she leaned across me to whisper to Uncle Ausban, "Curse? Was he referring to those accidents in the caves that I've heard people whispering about?"

"Accident?" my uncle Ausban repeated. He stopped, allowing the others around us to trail on ahead. "Acidents? Listen here. Since she came back from school, every eligible lad in the village has tried to court her. Her cousin Graves is crazy about her too, though he never had a chance — lucky lad. But her suitors have a queer way of attracting calamity. Three of them have died in the darkness of those caves. Oh, yes, Hurn Eden reported accidents. But the undertaker talked— about some very, very queer marks on the bodies."

"Oh, I heard some of that," I cut him short. "But it's natural enough that there may be wolf lairs in the caves."

"Maybe," my uncle Ausban answered, "but it's not natural that the Eden girl should have happened to be somewhere in

the caves each time. "He glanced about him warily, added in a whisper, "That young fellow with her today is Porter Marsh, another village boy. I wouldn't be in his shoes right now for all the gold of India."

"Oh, nonsense," I said. "Let's go in."

But I'll confess a shudder ran through me as I stared into the black jaws of the cavern where the leaden daylight made a dim and smoky luminence, and saw Clavel Eden, walking fast, the young man clinging to her arm.

Why did her figure seem somehow different, now that the shadows were around it?

Why couldn't I shut from my mind the thought of a woman screaming in the darkness, of curious snarls, of white scarred flesh, encircled by a chain.

CHAPTER TWO

"For there be things in darkness. . . ."

WE went through the iron gates and started slowly down that smooth, curling trail that led into the earth's black bowels. The hidden lights were low and the dim and sinister magnificence into which we were moving was grander and more terrible than the caverns at Carlsbad. For here, once we had passed through the first low tunnel where a fissure had been widened, our little trail, hugging one sombre wall, was like a thin and thread-like bridge swung by demon hands across the gulfs of primordial chaos.

Above us the reddish arches of volcanic stone stretched away to a cloud-like haze which the faint lights tinged with opal. Below us, gorges and valleys, crater-pitted, desolate as the cold, dead surface of the moon, extended into an infinity of darkness, out of which crawled shadows that were like imprisoned phantoms, or like some creeping, obscene life-stuff which the aeons of darkness had spawned.

Clavel Eden had vanished in the throng ahead of us, but she had not vanished from my mind. Here in these weird surroundings, I found myself pondering my uncle Ausban's words more seriously than I should have otherwise. Did his hatred for the Edens explain that entirely?

I knew that his hatred for them was a religion. It dated back to the early days when my grandfather, Jared Torrey, had been killed by young Griff Eden, Clavel's father. And Uncle Ausban and my own father, now dead, had driven Griff Eden and his young bride from their home, had forced them to hide for months like hunted creatures in the hills. Griff had finally come back, but without his wife, who had died and been buried in a nameless grave. But the old Indian servant, Otoma, had come bearing in her arms the tiny bundle that had been Clavel.

That had softened the Torreys, I suppose, for the feud had lain quiescent for years, only to flare again when, after the discovery of the caves by Hurn Eden, Clavel's uncle, my uncle Ausban had sued him for part rights, since portions of the caverns ran under our own lands.

But Uncle Ausban's hatred didn't explain Clavel herself, didn't explain those welts and bruises when she was a child, didn't explain those hideous scars and the chain I had seen, didn't explain . . .

Well, I had to quit thinking about it, switch my thoughts to something else. I asked: "Just what has Badenbrock discovered?"

"He's rather secretive," Uncle Ausban said. "I got the impression he may have found something that's frightened him."

"But what's he trying to find?" Lucia asked.

My uncle Ausban laughed. "Scientists," he explained for her benefit, "have long yearned for a chance to make experiments at a great depth beneath the earth's crust where the cosmic rays either don't reach, or are much weaker. They want

to see what effect an absence of these mysterious particles which bombarded us from outer space might have on the life of plants and animals born beyond their reach."

"Oh!" Lucia exclaimed excitedly, "I read something about that once. The writer said that the ancients had always believed that the sun was the soul-giver. He said that such creatures, born beyond the influence of sunlight and the cosmic rays might be monsters without any souls at all."

"Bah!" I cut her short. "Sensational Sunday-supplement stuff. What I'm interested in is simply in seeing what effect, if any, the absence of these rays will have on the eyes of creatures born beyond their reach. Badenbrock wrote that he would let me perform an eye operation on one of his animals."

My Uncle Ausban laughed then; I was to understand why . . . later.

WE didn't stop in the huge chamber where a lunch room had been installed and where the milling, chattering crowd were waiting for the supervised tour to begin. We hurried on by a short cut into the mammoth chamber they called the "Cathedral of the Titans," in the center of which was "The Devil's Well."

I found this place oppressive; it was so incredibly huge, and its vast dome was spiked with countless stalactites like the interior of some colossal engine of torture. The "Devil's Well" was in its center, a sheer, abysmal shaft that went down to a depth that stunned the senses, and back from its treacherous rim stretched tier on tier of gibbous stalagmites, glowing pink and amber under the concealed lights, hunched there like monstrous, mournful worshippers, awaiting the arising from the pit of some appalling deity before whom they would bow with demoniac wails and moanings.

Far back in the shadows at the pit's rim we met Badenbrock's assistant, Edmund Krafft. A tall, pale, shy young man, he helped us into the iron bucket in which we were to descend to the laboratory, the light of which we could see gleaming far down like a tiny star in darkness.

A powerful electric engine turned the gigantic drum on which a steel cable supporting the bucket was wound, and we descended slowly to the ledge fronting the cave in which Badenbrock conducted his experiments. The place was well lighted and well equipped and the scientist greeted us affably.

He was a big, lumpish man, with a dome-like head so completely bald that he resembled some swollen, hairless slug. But I found him interesting, and while the others wandered about the place, we fell into technical discusions.

It was the animals, of course, which interested me — Guinea pigs and rats. Organically, Badenbrock told me, he had found no noticeable difference between the animals born at the earth's surface and those born in the depths. A superficial examination of their eyes inclined me to his opinion.

But his manner indicated that he was hiding something. And it was when we had paused by a cage of the cave-born white rats that a subtle difference became apparent to me. Maybe it was the slight hush in his voice when he pointed them out that excited my imagination, but I did get the distinct impression that these creatures were somehow different from their earth-born brothers. Staring into their pink rodent eyes, I seemed to feel, shining from them, a conscious enmity . . . a cold menace that the mere savagery of an earth-beast does not approximate.

"There's a little thing that puzzles me," Badenbrock said, making an effort to be casual. "Let me show you. They seem perfectly normal in the light, but in the dark . . ."

He selected a fat, healthy-looking female, and carried her to a cage that contained a male born above ground. He put her in and she dropped down and stared complacently at the male. Then Badenbrock asked Krafft to cut the lights off for a moment.

The assistant touched a switch. The dark slammed down like something solid —dark such as is never encountered above ground, and cannot be described; dark that enters every pore of the body and solidifies around you. There was an instant hush, tense, electrical, as if unknown currents moved and pulsed in the gelid blackness.

Then there came a bestial rodent snarl, a scuffling of small feet, a shrill piercing scream of animal torment.

The lights went on. I was standing above the cage and sweat had broken out over my body, was running down into my eyes. The white male rat lay twitching in a welter of blood; the female croutched above him, was thrusting her crimson stained muzzle into the spurting gore of his torn throat.

Lucia and Uncle Ausban had moved toward us, but I waved them back. Badenbrock looked at me, his eyes round, his fat face twisted in ludicrous dismay. "It's fantastic," he stammered, "yet it happens every time. Why, it's as if the night-born hated the light-born, as if some devilish potion which the very darkness holds, drives them to an unearthly savagery, to ruthless destruction . . ."

"As if," I almost said, "that part of the animal which is the counterpart of the human soul were missing!"

But I didn't. I simply turned away, a little nauseated. I saw that Lucia was upset, too. So I told Badenbrock that I would come back later for the eye operation on the guinea pig. Krafft took us back up in the bucket.

It was a relief to get back to the crowd. The horrible incident had left a bad taste in my mouth, a worse taste in my mind. We rejoined the sightseers during their mid-tour pause in one of the centrally located caverns. Here there was a massive formation shaped rudely like a vaulted bridge, and the uniformed guides, bustling about with their long flashlights, were grouping the people on this arch so that they faced a man among the massed stalagmites above. This man lifted his hand for silence just as we entered and began the customary lecture, giving scientific interpretations of the wonders they had seen and were to see.

I PAID no attention to him. I had located Clavel Eden, standing not far away at the end of the bridge. Her blond escort, Porter Marsh, was with her, and a little further on were her cousin, Graves Eden, her uncle, Hurn Eden, and another man whom I did not recognize.

"The slick, dark fellow there," Uncle Ausban said, "is Judson Molt, a promoter from New York. I'm going to speak to him a moment."

He started off. I turned back toward the speaker who was rounding out his talk in a crescendo of superlatives. He hadn't mentioned anything about the usual stunt of cutting off the lights, but now abruptly, as he paused, it happened anyhow. The lights went out; the dark came down like a rush of mighty wings.

It was Clavel's choked scream which I heard first, then, above the growing murmur, Hurn Eden's voice, shouting, "On with the lights! Damned fools, I told you . . ."

Flashlights shot out their ineffectual beams; children began to squall, guides shouted discreetly. But already, I sensed, something horrible had happened and I started in a wild run toward the spot where I had last seen Clavel.

Utter confusion reigned now. The guides were trying to hold the crowd back, and the light from their flashes was turned away from the spot where Clavel

had stood. But she wasn't there anyhow. I passed Hurn Eden who was swinging his long flash as he dashed to the aid of his guides. I stumbled against Judson Molt and Uncle Ausban, and then I saw her.

I saw her because I heard the hideous snarling sound. She was crouched in the shadow of a stalagmite, half invisible in her dark dress, and the sound was still going on and I could see the frightful way her body was shaking and shivering.

Swooping down I gathered her up in my arms, muttered in her ear, "It's all right, it's Hal Torrey . . ."

Almost instantly her body relaxed, slumped against mine. Graves Eden came stumbling up then; he seemed to have been running in circles.

"I — I couldn't find her!" he choked out.

She was still huddled against me, held close in my arms. It was then that I felt her hand crawling under my coat, thrusting something into the inside pocket. The next moment she had turned to her cousin.

"Take me out, Graves," she said.

"Where's Porter?"

She shuddered. "I don't know."

He took her arm and led her away. Just then the lights flashed on and I saw Uncle Ausban. He was stooping, staring at something in the shadows behind the stalagmite. As I took a step toward him he turned. "What is it?" I gasped, staring past him as I tried to make out the crumpled shape beyond.

"Since you're here," he replied, "you may as well see."

I came up beside him and stopped. Porter Marsh lay in an awkward sprawl on the ground. His head was turned sideways and I could see a trickle of blood running from a gash in his skull. His face had the look of death.

Uncle Ausban gripped my arm. "That wound on the skull," he said in terse clipped syllables, "will be made much of. The young man, in sudden fright, lurched back against the stalagmite and cracked his skull. Oh, yes! But let me show you what they'll try to pass over."

He stooped, struck a match, pointed. I bent forward and was sickened. In the soft part of Marsh's throat, just under the chin, were the deep and distinct imprints of teeth — teeth which had bitten into his jugular!

There was a scrape of feet behind us and we straightened to stare into the red, scowling face of Hurn Eden.

"What are you doing here, Auban Torrey?" he snarled.

"Take a look," Uncle Ausban snapped, "take a look and then try to disguise those teeth prints and make them look like rock cuts."

Hurn stared past us, jerked his head about with an oath. Uncle Ausban grasped my arm and propelled me away.

CHAPTER THREE

Modern Circe

THE guides had quieted the turmoil, transformed the mob into an orderly procession, marching toward the elevators.

"Money will be refunded," they announced. "The lights were turned off by mistake and a young lady fainted."

We found Lucia and were herded into the elevators with the others and carried to the surface. Outside in the grey and cloudy dusk we walked along with the crowd toward the parked cars and busses.

"You take the car and drive on to the house," Uncle Ausban told Lucia. "Hal and I will stay here a while."

He drew me aside from the trail and we sat down on a rock. He made a brown paper cigarette with his long shaking fingers, lighted it and took a puff. His face was grey and sharp as a shard of old pottery.

"Well, Hal," he said, "I guess you understand it as well as I do."

"Understand what?" I asked evasively.

"Understand," he answered, "why I

said to you what I did this morning."

"About the girl, you mean?" I asked, too innocently.

"Girl, if you want to call her that," he growled. "*Succuba,* I call her — a fiend that hell has spawned to feed on young lives."

"Oh, my God," I said, "this is not the middle ages."

"No," he replied, "but the monsters that existed then exist now, though why a merciful God permits them to be born, I don't know. But science, as you have seen, is answering some questions about them."

"What are you driving at?"

"You saw the rats this morning," he said simply.

Oh, I knew what he meant well enough. But there was a sickness in me, a sickness of soul and brain. It was what I hadn't been willing to face. Now his voice went on in an iron mutter that beat against my skull like hammer blows.

"I'd found out a good many things about her," he said, "a long time ago. But I didn't get it all straight until Badenbrock began his experiments with the rats. Then it was all too clear. The woman herself is a monster, a thing without a soul like those rodents. She's not human."

"You're crazy!" I gasped. "Clavel Eden wasn't — "

"Clavel Eden—" he cut me short— "was born down there in those depths too!"

My mouth flew open; my heart stopped; I could only gape at him.

He smiled a twisted smile. "It's true, my boy, though how I found it out is my own secret. When your father and I drove Griff Eden into the wilds he took his wife and went down into those caverns. He went down by some secret entrance which I haven't yet discovered. The old Indian woman probably showed him the way. But the child was born down there anyhow—somewhere in the earth's bowels. And she's not human, my boy, she's a something, a something without a name — like those rats!"

"And you think she actually killed those boys, and that Hurn Eden's been covering it up?" I tried to make my tone derisive.

"I didn't see it done," he answered. "Whether she bit their throats herself, or whether that was done by some familiar-demon, like the witches used to have, I don't know. But she's responsible. And Hurn Eden won't save her again. A group of us in the town have taken a vow that if another village boy died like that, and the sheriff and the officers refused to act, as I expect they will refuse, we'd take things into our own hands and administer God's law."

"You mean kill her?" I choked out, "like they did witches?"

"We'll give her a trial," he answered. "I think she'll confess."

I was utterly horrified, so horrified that I made no further protest. If this horrible sacrilege were to be prevented, I'd have to learn as much as I could.

"I'm telling you this freely," he went on, "because you're a Torrey and no Torrey will betray the secrets of his blood. And I'm asking you, in your dead father's name, to join with us in it."

My heart took a plop against my ribs. But I got control of my voice. "I'd have to be certain she was guilty," I hedged.

"You'll be certain of that," he answered. "Then you'll be prepared to act with us. There can be no evasion of God's command: 'Ye shall not suffer a witch to live.'"

I was half-suffocated by now. I don't know what was going on in my brain, but I was in a panic to get away from him at any cost.

"What do you want me to do?" I mumbled.

"The others will be here soon," he said. "The news is flying through the village now. We'll wait to see if the law is going

to act; then we'll strike. We may need the car. You'd better go and get it and wait for us here."

I NODDED dumbly, got up, and stumbled off. I went down the rocky slope away from the main path and plunged into the trees below. But where the little trail forked—one branch leading toward the Eden house, the other toward ours—I paused.

Sweat was cold on my brow. It was all too monstrous, too barbaric. To believe for a moment that that lovely girl could. . . .

Suddenly I remembered that she had thrust something into my pocket, there in the cave. I fumbled for it, snatched it out. Even in the thickening dusk I could see it plainly. I was a wadded handkerchief — a handkerchief on which were still fresh stains of crimson!

I thrust the thing back into my pocket, stood numbed with indecision. Sanity told me to leave the whole hideous business alone. But I couldn't, I couldn't see it done. At least I must face her first, give her a chance to explain to me. I started running toward the Eden house.

I reached the rambling stone house, panting with exhaustion. A car was just leaving the driveway — probably Graves going back to the caverns. Maybe I could see her alone. At any rate, I knew that the scrap of bloody evidence in my pocket would make any of them listen to me.

I knocked on the front door, then impatiently pushed into the hall, stopped as a shadow from a doorway scuttled toward me. It was the old Indian woman, Otoma, and she thrust her small, mummy-like body before me, sputtering, "You no come in, you no come in . . ."

I shoved her aside, strode to the lighted door of the living room. Clavel was there.

If she had deliberately posed for this scene she could not have made herself more provocative, more darkly alluring. Her small, luscious body, only half covered by a rumpled black negligee and filmy scraps of underthings, lay in a seductive sprawl on the divan. Her black hair was unbound, the upper part of her face was hidden by a wet towel, so that only her lips, red as bitten pomegranates, were visible.

I had planned to be firm. Now I felt my breath coming short, my strength failing me. I was beginning to realize that in her presence I was somehow changed, transformed. I thought of the enchantress, Circe and her beasts . . .

Padding softly across the floor, I whispered, "Clavel, Clavel."

She straightened with a start, her hair shaking about her pale face in a smoky cloud. Then she recognized me; her melting eyes fastened on my face. "So you came?" she asked softly.

"You knew I'd come?"

"Of course," she answered. "When I put that bloody handkerchief in your pocket, I knew you would not betray me. But I knew you would come to me, beg me to explain." She laughed harshly, bitterly. "Then I would entangle another victim in my web."

My face must have mirrored my horror. "You're mad!" I gasped.

"Perhaps," she answered, "or perhaps, as they say, I'm a witch, a monster. Well, give the handkerchief to them. They can burn me if they want to, and drive a stake through my heart!"

My eyes narrowed, staring at her. Was this a trap? Was she saying this because she knew the tragic pose would snare me? Or was she actually on the verge of hysteria, delirious, talking out of her head?

"Tell me the truth," I said, "and I swear the mob will not touch you."

"The truth?" again that terrible laugh. "If I told you the truth, you'd strangle me yourself!"

The hair on the nape of my neck bristled; my blood ran cold. I had an impulse to turn and run from the room. But I didn't. Something that emanated from her, some powerful curent that was stronger than my own will, held me. I said: "Then we'll wait for the explanations. Get ready at once. I'm going to take you away."

"Away!" her laugh was a derision." We couldn't escape. I know what's been going on. I know about your uncle and his fanatics. Every road is being watched now."

I didn't doubt it. I had a sudnen inspiration then. "Listen," I said, "if we can get into the caves, get to Badenbrock's laboratory, we'll be safe. He's a scientist; he's above all this hysteria. He'll hide you until it's blown over, until people are sane again.

She was staring at me in horror. "Into the caves?" A shudder ran through her, she buried her face in her hands, trembling. "Oh, my God, no! Better let them burn me than that!"

I knew then that no argument would avail; yet time was short, and it was the only chance to save her. And I had to do that; I couldn't help it, couldn't understand it, but I had to save her, if it cost my own life, my own sanity. I saw what I must do then and I acted instantly, ruthlessly.

In my pocket there was a kit which contained among other instruments, a hypodermic syringe and phials containing a powerful narcotic. I had brought it along to Badenbrock's laboratory in the expectation of performing that operation on the Guinea pig. Now, as she sat with her head buried in her hands, I brought the syringe out, fitted a needle, swiftly punctured a phial . . .

She looked up then. But I was ready for her. Seizing one of her arms, I jabed the needle in and pressed the plunger. Terror froze the scream on her lips. I dropped the syringe and caught her in my arms.

The drug acted almost instantly. I lifted her and staggered into the hall. Old Otoma rushed toward me, cursing, beating at me with her skinny arms. But I kicked her savagely aside, ran on down the hall and out into the moonless night.

CHAPTER FOUR

Into The Depths of Darkness

IF my brain was the brain of a madman then, it had a madman's cunning, and my body a madman's exhaustless strength. How I stumbled across the highway and through the dark woods and up the steep slope to the cave's entrance without being seen, I shall never know. But I did. And I skirted the lighted elevator building and came to the iron gates where the trail went down. And I found the gates locked!

I laid Clavel's unconscious body on one of the benches, and stood over her, my brain swirling with black despair. I knew that Uncle Ausban and his followers were probably at the elevator building, and at any moment I might be discovered.

A sound whirled me about. Feet were coming up the trail. I slunk toward the sound, crouched down behind a shrub like a waiting beast. The figure came into view, a tall plodding form, stooped, bespectacled, pallid. It was Edmund Krafft, Badenbrock's assistant!

Suddenly, as he came even with me, I sprang up. He jerked back, a gasp that was half moan blurting through his lips; his right hand was jerking as he tried to yank something from his coat pocket. I seized his coat lapels, pulled him forward. He was limp as a dead snake. My left hand closed on his right wrist and I yanked it out, gun and all.

I twisted; he sputtered inanely; the gun dropped.

"Is Badenbrock in his laboratory?" I rasped.

At first he couldn't speak and then he managed to sputter, "No."

"Well," I said, "I want the keys. Why are you armed?"

"I wouldn't go in there without a gun," he whined.

I shoved him back, snatched up the revolver and grabed him again. I made him hand over the keys and his flashlight. Then I took him by the coat collar and shoved him toward the bench where Clavel lay.

"Pick her up!" I ordered.

He saw her, sprang back like a dog that's run onto a rattlesnake. A twisted scream ripped from his throat. "Oh, my God, no!" he shrilled. "Not her! Let me tell you about her, what I heard tonight . . . ."

I poked the gun in his back. "Do you want me to kill you, you damned fool?" I rasped. "Do as I say!"

He shut up then and did as I ordered. But I've never seen such abject terror in my life. I forced him to carry her through the gates and I followed, locking them behind us. Then we started down.

It was a strange and terrible journey. Down, down into massed darkness, with the tiny beam from the flash making only a thread of light in that vast kingdom of shadow. At any other time the staggering, mumbling wretch would have been pitiful. But I drove him coldly, brutally, like a slave master, and when he tried to whimper about monsters, and about there being others in the darkness like her, about having seen with his own eyes things upon which the sun had never shone, I kicked him into silence.

To tell the truth, his panic was affecting me also. The place was so vast, so dark, so unlike anything on earth, that the very laws of God and nature seemed suspended here. Not only that, but I had the distinct impression that something, some *being,* or *beings,* followed us into the awful blackness. Time after time I stopped, my heart paralyzed, thinking I heard padded footfalls. But I drove myself on, just as I drove him.

And the caverns, as I had guessed, were deserted — of human life anyhow. All activity was now taking place above the surface. We reached the "Cathedral of the Titans," and at the engine Krafft collapsed, a grovelling, broken wretch.

But I kicked him to life, made him start the engine and get into the bucket with us. Slowly we started down into the "Devil's Well."

Terror had paralyzed even his drooling lips now. He stood like a zombie while the bucket swayed and the walls of grey stone slipped past. And then, halfway down, it happened. The engine stopped.

"What's wrong?" I husked from between frozen lips.

He opened his mouth as if gagging, gulped, "I, I don't know."

"Do something then, get it started!" I snarled.

His fluttering hands began to fumble at the buttons that controlled the engine. But nothing happened. I stared up, but there was no light above us — only darkness, only a silence that was suddenly awful.

Then Krafft broke. He began to shake and slobber and bleat. "Now you'll have to listen to me . . . now you'll have to hear it all. We're hanging helpless here with a *Thing* that will devour us."

"Where did you get that stuff?" I growled.

FROM Hurn Eden's own lips!" he shrilled. "Before he collapsed with a stroke, he told everything. After the sheriff left, your Uncle Ausban and some men cornered him in the elevator building. They told him what they were going to do to her, told him nothing could stop them. He blustered at first, said it was

all lies your uncle Ausban Torrey had cooked up. But finally he broke, began to plead and beg . . . .

"He said he had always known there was something wrong with the girl, but that she wasn't a criminal, that they couldn't harm her. He said if they would let her alone he'd get doctors, specialists, have her put in an institution. Your Uncle Ausban laughed at him. Then Hurn Eden had a stroke. One of the guides was trying to revive him when I left. The others went to get her . . . ."

There in that awful dark, I cursed. "Uncle Ausban's a devil!"

"No," Krafft said, "no, he's right."

"What do you mean, you fool?"

"I mean," Krafft said, "that she's not human — she's like those rats. She was born beyond the reach of the more powerful cosmic rays. She's got no more soul than a plant, a vegetable. That's not all. There are other monsters like her in here. I've seen them. . . ."

"You're a lunatic!" I snarled. I had cut off the flash to save the battery; now I turned it on again, sprayed the rock wall near which we hung. "Look!" I exclaimed. "There's a hole of some sort. It's big enough to get into and we can reach it!"

He stared. The place was just a ragged crevice, snaking off into blackness, and there was no ledge. But it was a little below us and a jump would make it. But Krafft began to sputter: "No, God no! Not that hole. Let's wait here!"

"And have that mob find us?" I snarled.

"But not there!" Krafft yammered. "That was where I saw the thing . . . God, it was horrible. It looked grey like a slug, and it looked a little human, but twisted, small, hairless. I saw it once when I passed, and it jerked back into the hole like a rat!"

An icy chill ran through me then, a sudden memory of the words of that little girl long ago: "The little grey man . . . ."

I had to smother that thought or go mad. I said: "Anyhow, we're going to chance it. I'm going to jump, then help you and the girl across. And one false move from you and I'll kill you and throw you in."

He knew I meant it, and by an effort of will steadied himself a little. I put Clavel in his arms, then climbed to the bucket's rim, held the cable, gritted my teeth, and jumped.

I made it. Then I had him hand Clavel down to me and afterwards I helped him across, though I had to threaten him with the pistol again.

The place was just a ragged crack where some cataclysm had split the mountainous masses of rock asunder. Carrying Clavel, I led the way in and found a place where the crack widened and there was a level floor.

It was then that I noticed the odor. It wasn't just the odor of a pit, of rocks, of rats, of reptiles. It was different. It was animal-like, though fetid and foul. I noticed too there were branching holes leading out of the place, holes that a man couldn't have crawled through but large enough for a wolf. Only that smell wasn't a wolf-smell.

But I didn't say anything, didn't want Krafft to notice. I spread out my coat on the rocks and laid Clavel on it. She was still unconscious, but breathing easily. I said: "There's nothing to worry about. In the morning Badenbrock will raise the bucket and come down to his laboratory. We'll hail him quietly and everything will be . . . ."

I didn't finish; I had suddenly noticed Krafft. He was standing in a frozen half-crouch staring toward the dark cleft where the crevice extended on into the rock. But his face was putty-pale, his eyes bugged, and there was a stream of saliva running over his lower lip. Then I saw it too—and horror gripped me.

It was something like a head — a bald, grey wrinkled thing that might have been a withered melon. Only it had a sort of twisted snout, and it had eyes—eyes that gleamed in the dark like a rodent's. Almost instantly the thing was gone, but the sick twisting in my stomach continued.

Then Krafft was yammering: "I told you, by God, I told you . . . . I knew she'd attract those other monsters."

Suddenly he made a lunge toward Clavel. "We've got to throw her into the pit. It's no crime to destroy something that's not human, we've got to—"

I stepped toward him, my fist doubled. I started to knock him cold and get him out of the way. But I might need his help, poor as it was. So I said coldly, grimly, "Krafft, I'm warning you for the last time. I said before that I'd kill you. Now I swear that if you make another move like that, I'll hold you down on this floor and with the knife in my pocket I'll whittle you slowly to pieces. Get it? Now. Have you got another flash, anything to make a light?"

"There's a candle stump in my pocket," he mumbled, "I always carry something besides a flash, because they go bad sometimes."

I TOOK the candle from him, lighted it and stuck it in its own wax on a rock. Then I said: "I'm going into that crevice and see what the thing is. You're going to stay here with the girl, and you're going to take care of her if you value your life. Do you understand?"

His teeth were knocking together but he managed to make it plain that he did. I took the revolver in one hand and the flash in the other and started into the cleft in the rock.

Now don't get me wrong; I wasn't brave. I was half dead with terror. But action is better than simply waiting. So I forced myself or

The crevice wound and twisted. The light from the candle in the cave behind me faded away. But the frightful odor in the air persisted. Nowhere could I see that grey and awful shape that I had briefly glimpsed, nor could I hear him. Yet I could sense him, creeping through the dark ahead, leading me on perhaps to some lair where scores of his nameless, hideous fellows would leap on me for a ghoul's feast.

I was panting, sweating, and I suddenly realized that the crevice was leading up. I had been climbing steadily. Then it widened and I came into the second chamber. This place wasn't large, and I could see nothing moving in it, yet I stopped, brushed by a wind of terror. For unlike the other cave, this had unmistakably been occupied—by *something.*

Here the dirt of the floor had been worn fine, and there was a pile of pine boughs in one corner which had certainly been brought down from the surface. In another corner was a pile of clean-picked bones — bones of all sorts, but mostly what looked to be the skeletons of birds, rabbits, rats and other small rodents.

Then, as I stared, there came a sound that threw me back into the passage, my light snapping off as I flattened myself against the wall.

The sound was the harsh whisper of panting breath, and the unmistakable noise of feet scraping along the twisting corridor beyond.

I do not know what horror I expected to meet, what fire-breathing leviathan of the earth's depths, what ogre or abysmal demon of folklore. But I expected anything but what I actually saw when light flared suddenly in the chamber, and the rock walls, throwing back the gleam, showed a crouching figure on the chamber's threshold, a figure panting under a burden slung across one shoulder.

The hunched figure, whose wild eyes roved about the cave, was Graves Eden.

The limp, inert form dangling across his shoulder was — my sister, Lucia!

CHAPTER FIVE

Demon's Madness

I'D never liked Graves Eden, with his lean horse face, his shifty eyes. But what before had only been repulsive, was now revealed in the reflected glare of his flash as the lineaments of a fiend. God, but I was glad for the gun in my hand then.

When the first shocked paralysis had passed, a savage rage boiled in me, and I stepped out before him. He screamed, and I saw that his terror was greater than mine had been. And as he jumped back Lucia might have fallen from his arms, if at that instant his dazed eyes hadn't seen the pistol in my hand and his numbed ears quivered to my command:

"Put her down gently. The show's over, Graves. Put her down and get ready to die, because I'm going to take you apart, limb by limb."

The fear of the gun in my hand had now succeeded his first shock of horror, and he obeyed mechanically, like a robot. He placed Lucia carefully on the floor and I saw with a wild surge of relief that she was gagged and bound. Hence she must still be alive.

Graves Eden was crouching now, leering at me like a cornered beast. "You devil!" he snarled. You've beaten me — you and your Uncle Ausban. I knew you carried Clavel off. Old Otoma told me. And I knew that Ausban Torrey had been plotting a long time to make her the victim of his scheme to steal the caverns. But when you carried her off that was too much. I went to your house and kidnapped your sister. I intended to hold her as the price of Clavel's life."

"You're lying," I grated, with a derisive laugh. "You think you can fool me now? You're a sadist!" You're probably responsible for terrorizing Clavel yourself. You wanted her but she wouldn't have you. That's why you've murdered every man who's come near her — "

His jaw dropped, his eyes goggled. "That's not true!" he panted. "It's a lie and you know it and — " the rest was a bellow of rage as he ducked and charged.

It's a wonder I didn't shoot him, but there must be an instinctive distaste in me for shooting an unarmed man. I met his rush with the pistol clubbed. But my first blow glanced off his skull, and the next instant his powerful fingers had fastened on my throat. He had dropped his flash but I was still clinging to mine, and in its wavering beam I could see his bestial, snarling features as he dug his fingers deeper into my throat.

I fell back, but the wall blocked my fall. Otherwise it might all have been over. Now, with the wall to brace me, I slammed my hands together in a wedge, ripped up, tore his clutches loose. Then, lunging forward, I threw him off balance, and the pistol got to his skull. He went down in a limp heap, his scalp bleeding. I didn't know whether I'd crushed it or not, and I didn't care.

I ran to Lucia's side. With my knife I ripped off her gag and bonds. Her eyes were still closed, but she was breathing steadily. He'd forced some sort of dope on her, I guessed. I picked her up, straightened, turned toward the tunnel through which she had been carried. Then I paused. That tunnel, I now knew, led up to the surface. It must be the secret entrance of which Uncle Ausban had spoken. At any rate, that way meant safety for Lucia.

But there was Clavel — alone, drugged by my own hand. And there was the quaking Krafft with her, and there was still the twisted grey horror we had seen. I knew I couldn't leave her, even for the time necessary to carry Lucia out.

SLOWLY, carying Lucia with me, I started back. I wished then that I hadn't had to knock Graves Eden out so quickly. There was much that I needed to learn — particularly about Clavel. No doubt, I told myself, he had drugged her into near insanity. But did that explain—?

No, there was much it didn't explain. Still, I was glad that now my darkest fears about her had been dissipated. She wasn't a monster, even though she had been born in these depths, she wasn't —

Suddenly I halted as a series of fearful sounds reached my ears. There came first the frightful snarl I had heard on other occasions, and then a voice — Clavel's — wild with a burden of mad passion, was screaming:

"Cut deeper! Cut deeper . . . . Hurt me, draw the blood!"

I can't express the sick horror that swamped me then. All the hideous fears I had experienced so far seemed less than this. For suddenly those screams had brought back to me all the dark suspicions I had pushed from my brain — the things they had said about her, the scars I had seen in El Paso, and that horrible chain with its suggestion of torture-cults and devil worship.

I began to run wildly, trying not to knock against the walls, fighting to keep my balance and shield Lucia. And then, as I neared the first cave, I saw that the candle I had left had gone out. And plunging into the blackness, with the beam from my flash shooting ahead, I jerked to a halt, paralyzed, petrified with nauseous unbelief.

Clavel stood against one wall. The filmy negligée had been torn from her body, and she was standing there with her hands strained upward like a figure on a crucifix, her body writhing and twisting like a snake on hot coals. And crouched before her, his face a mask of idiocy, was Edmund Krafft, and in his shaking hands were sharp rocks with which he was cutting and lacerating her body, while she screamed shrilly for more torture . . . .

I must have gone half insane then. I don't even remember placing Lucia on the floor. But I did. Then I was catapulting across the cave like a charging tiger. I seized Krafft and the jerk with which I pulled him back flung him against one wall. He crumpled, staggered up, his lips drooling, trying to utter sounds.

But I grabbed him again, and mercilessly holding him upright, I beat my right fist into his face until he was insensible. Only then did I drop him and turn to Clavel. She had dropped to the floor, lay, a sobbing heap, on my coat. I went over and stood above her, panting, filled with disgust and horror. "How did this happen?" I rasped.

She sat up, lifted her tear-wet face, grabbed at scraps of negligee to cover her blood smeared body.

"The candle went out," she sobbed, "the little grey thing must have put it out. She looked toward Krafft, lying with his face a bloody pulp. "It wasn't his fault. I made him do it, made him torture me to keep the dark from claiming me, from making me a monster. That was better than for me to tear his throat out with my teeth . . . ."

I was sick, so sick I could scarcely stand. But I said, relentlessly, "Tell me everything."

"I WILL," she said, "I will, and then I hope you kill me. It began long ago, so long that I don't remember when. But I was only a small child. Old Otoma used to tell me stories, and she told me of how I had been born in the depths of the earth where the earth-creatures live. The tales frightened me and I began to have dreams. "Only, she paused and her face wrinkled bewilderedly, "only they weren't all dreams.

"Do you remember that I told you once

that a little grey man came in the night and pinched me? Well, it was only partly true, for I pinched myself, I did it to keep from sleeping, for it was after I had gone to sleep that the little grey thing came . . . . Yes, it really came. Otoma brought him. She said that he, too, was born in the darkness and that I must play with him. Sometimes she took me to a cave in the night, where the thing lived.

"That stopped, of course, when I got bigger, and later I went off to school. But I still dreamed, I still couldn't stand the dark. I got so I couldn't be in the dark at all. I'd have a sort of fit and begin to snarl like a strangling animal. In order to keep from being embarrassed before my girl friends, I used to wear a dog-chain stretched tightly around my waist, hidden there, and if I got accidently in the dark, I'd twist that chain and make it hurt me, so that I wouldn't fall into one of those awful spells.

"But it wasn't until I came back here this year that I realized how awful those spells were. Then, after two of my boyfriends had died in accidents, I began to hear rumors that they'd found teeth marks on them. And gradually I realized that I was being accused of attacking them in the dark. And the horror of it is that I don't know myself, for when the dark comes on me, my mind goes blank, and I seem to be doing something, but I don't know what, and afterwards I can't remember what has happened."

"Did you ever," I asked, "feel any impulse to draw blood, or to inflict suffering in your normal moments?"

"Never!" she swore. "Before God, never!"

"Then," I said through gritted teeth, "there must be some other explanation. There's got to be!"

"But that little grey — "she began, and then she screamed.

I whirled and panic twisted at my throat. Out of the darkness of one of the holes, the awful thing was creeping. It's naked hairless body was like the shrunken form of a half starved child, only more twisted and deformed. It's head was bulbous, monstrous, it's features like nothing so much as a monkey from which all the hair has been shaved.

And it was creeping toward Lucia's unconscious form!

I sprang. The thing let out a weird, piping shriek and scuttled on all fours for the crevice. I followed. Raising the pistol I sent two random shots into the dark, scrambled after it. But at a twist in the passage I stumbled. The flash flew from my hands, I sprawled.

I howled then too, in horrible anticipation of those slimy tentacles which I expected to fasten on me. But the hands that reached out from a niche in the wall to grip me were large and powerful. I felt their grip on my neck and tried to turn. But the next instant a rock crashed against my skull and then there was nothing but blackness, splashed by fading lights.

CHAPTER SIX

Heritage of Terror

WHEN I opened my eyes I was in the second cave. I was lying on the floor, bound hand and foot, and a big man was standing over me, a big man with a red face, who stared down at me with a smug smile.

"Great God!" I gasped. "I thought that you—"

"That I'd had a stroke?" Hurn Eden laughed. "Oh, no, I faked that little stroke. As soon as Ausban Torrey had gone off with his cohorts and the guide had gone to phone a doctor, I sneaked out. I saw you attack Krafft and I've been following you ever since, hearing every word you said. After you went down in the bucket I killed the engine.

Then I sneaked outside and came down through the secret entrance to the caves, which is hidden, by the way, under the waterfalls behind our house."

I didn't quite get it yet. I lifted my head, scanned the room. I saw Lucia and she was still unconscious. Beside her lay Clavel, gagged and bound. Krafft's bloody body lay nearby, and Graves Eden was sprawled just where I had left him. I turned toward the other corner and my gorge rose. There, squatting precisely like a trained monkey, was the gruesome little monster I had chased.

Hurn Eden laughed. "Not a pretty specimen, is he?" he chortled. "I didn't think so either, when I first saw him. But he's all right, quite harmless. He's Clavel's brother, you see."

"Brother!" I gasped, and choked on the word.

Hurn Eden laughed again. "Sure," he said, "but I didn't know about him myself until a few months ago. You see, when Griff's wife gave birth to twins down here in the hideout to which your father and Ausban Torrey had driven them, the boy was a sickly little runt, and after old Otoma had dropped him and hurt his head, Griff, who was as hard as the rest of us Edens, told old Otoma to throw him into the pit. But she didn't. She sneaked him away and kept him alive and later hid him down here in the cave because she was afraid that if Griff knew it, he'd kill her and the runt too. So he lived here like a rat. After the fall his head wasn't much good anyhow, though of course it's the living in the dark and existing like a rodent that's made him the perfect little monster he is. But Indians are queer; the old hag seemed to have some affection for him and even (I learned that later) used to sneak Clavel off at night and bring her here to see him . . . ."

"Look out there!" he suddenly gave me a kick, because I had been frantically trying to get my hands loose while he talked. "Take it easy. I just want to let one Torrey know how badly the Edens have outsmarted him. You won't live to tell it. My plans are all . . . ."

"You mean you planned all this?" I gasped, incredulous.

"Oh, I made lots of plans," he said, "before I hit on the right one. You see, none of these caverns belong to me. They all belonged to Griff, and hence to Clavel. And they're worth millions. I wanted Clavel to marry Graves, but she couldn't see him." He glanced coldly toward the still unconscious form of his son. "Not that I blame her; never had any sense much; just like him to get himself in this fool fix tonight."

He paused, calmly took out a plug of tobacco and cut himself a slice. "Well, to get on, when I really hit on the right plan was after I'd choked the truth out of old Otoma, found out about the monster and about why Clavel had always acted so crazy in the dark. That's where I got my idea. I read up on a little psychology and I found out that childhood terrors can cause all sorts of craziness, especially when they've been repressed—even cause what they call a split-personality. I realized that Clavel's actions when she got in the dark was a sign that this splitting of the personality had already started. All I had to do was to help it along and get things ready to have her declared insane and put in a mad-house. I killed all those boys myself. It served two purposes—got suitors out of the way and convinced the world—and even Clavel herself—that she was a night-born monster. Course I'll have to give Ausbau Torrey credit for helping things along, and I was tickled when he gave me the chance to blat it all out tonight. I wouldn't have cared if he'd got her, though it's worked out just as well . . . ."

There was something terrifying about the man's coldness, something more

frightening than the ravings of any maniac. But I wanted to keep him talking, gain all the time I could.

"And you managed to kill Porter Marsh in there today?"

HE CHUCKLED appreciatively. "Oh sure, it was easy, even to the business of shovin' a blood-soaked handkerchief in her hand while she was havin' her spell. But lemme show you." He paused, reached down and picked up the long flashlight which had been laid on a rock. "This jigger," he said, "cost me a small fortune in the city where I had it made. But just look at it." He pressed a spot on the rim of the flashlight's base and my eyes opened in wonder. The cap flew off and out shot two thin steel arms, each terminating in small metal teeth.

"With this jigger it was easy," he said. "Course I arranged for the lights to go off. Then all I had to do was to grab the guy by the throat with my little frog-catcher, sling him against something to crush his skull, then slip the jigger back into the flashlight sheath. It did two tricks at once—killed him and left the imprints of teeth on his throat. In a little bit I'm going to use it on you, only I'm going to tear your throat clean out with it."

The words brought me back with a shudder to reality. But I knew that neither bribery nor pleas would appeal to this fiend.

"I reckon," he said, "we might as well start."

Before I could utter a word he had stepped to Krafft's body. Snapping the teeth of the devilish contrivance into the unconscious man's throat, he ripped up, tore out his jugular vein with one jerk.

"Great God!" I gasped. "Why you devil, you can't get away with wholesale murder in this country."

"Sure you can," he said affably, "if you're smart. All I got to do now is kill the rest of you, then smear the little monkey-faced runt with the blood. It'll look like Clavel lured the rest of you here, helped the monster kill you and then got killed herself for her pains. The runt's got good enough teeth anyhow. Later I'll lead the mob here, throw another stroke to show my grief, and then I'll be free to sell the cavern to Judson Molt and pocket the money myself."

He was right, too horribly right. There was no hope at all. As he turned away, I began savagely twisting at my bound wrists again. Then I stopped, my flesh crawling. With the murderous clawed instrument in his hands he was starting toward Clavel.

Mustering all my strength I got my knees under me, straightened to my feet, took a jumping step toward him. He whirled. I flung myself on him, my teeth fastening on his shoulder. With an oath he flung me aside, slammed his fist into my face, knocked me back to the floor.

His laughter was a snarl. "For that," he said, "I'll let you watch it all. Maybe I'll turn the little beast loose on your sister before she dies, maybe I can get him to bite her throat for me."

I was too stunned with horror now even to curse him. My brain was shrieking wild prayers, prayers which I knew were too late. He was bending above Clavel again, the toothed weapon extended. She screamed, began to thresh about. He seized her, forced her back against the floor.

Painfully I flung myself to my knees again. A mist of madness fogged my eyes. I wouldn't see it done! If I couldn't kill him, I'd force him to kill me first anyhow. I started up—

But stopped. My eyes had flicked toward the crevice opening, focused on the figure that was framed there. Crouched like a spitting cat, her sharp face thrust from the hood of her black *reboza,* stood old Otoma. One root-like hand held a curved, gleaming knife!

Hurn Eden was still struggling with Clavel, cursing as he tried to hold her steady to fasten the steel teeth in her throat. Now I held my breath, prayed in an agony of suspense as the old hag moved out, slithered on cat-feet across the cavern floor, the knife raised.

She was only a few feet from him when he turned, and my hope collapsed. "Why, you old buzzard!" he roared. "Kill me, eh?"

The hag's beady eyes glared back into his. "You kill', all!" she snarled, "Me no care! But you no keel Clavel!"

"The hell I won't! And you too!"

He dived at her. The knife grazed his arm. But his big fist caught her, sent her frail body spinning back. The knife flew through the air in a shining arc—God in heaven! It landed at my feet!

In the fury that gripped him now he didn't see it. He had lurched toward the fallen wretch, was kicking and cursing her. I twisted about. My frantic fingers seized the razor sharp blade, ripped the ropes at my wrists, flew to my ankles . . . .

He whirled. But I was already lunging. The rage on his face faded to brute terror. But even the terror didn't save him.

I won't dwell on that. It was swifty over, and I've never lost a moment's sleep, even at the memory of the way he looked afterward.

The rest of the night's activities can be briefly told. I summoned aid and we carried the living and the dead out of that hell-hole. Krafft was dead, and so was old Otoma, and as I have intimated, Hurn Eden. Graves Eden recovered. The girls were practically unharmed. And I had heard enough from Hurn Eden's own lips to clear up all but one point in the mystery—the rats.

Badenbrock cleared that up. Ashamedly, the fat scientist confessed that in order to get Hurn Eden to let him use the cave he had agreed to fake the monster-rats—feeding them drugs to make them murderous. Hurn had told him that he wanted to create a sensation to attract the curious to the caves, and Badenbrock was innocent of any knowledge of his real plot.

The poor wretched creature from the cave was sent to an institution but did not survive the change long. The rodent-like existence in the darkness seemed the only life he could lead.

But what's more important is—Clavel!

I took her at once to a specialist. He soon discovered that Hurn Eden's amateur diagnosis had been just about correct. She had really been on the verge of a complete breakdown. But once the festering cause was removed, she made swift progress, and our happiness since we've been married has helped, too. She's even more lovely than ever, now that the terror has left her, and though the scars on her lovely body will remain forever, the scars on her mind are healing. Only once in a while—on the darkest nights, and with the wind wailing in the pines—do we have to keep that little night-lamp burning by our bed. And on those nights, I keep a silent vigil. . . .

THE END

There are now thirty-odd magazines made up of re-print stories on the newsstands. These magazines give no sign that their stories are second-hand; that the public has read them in other magazines a few years ago. Certain publishers present these stories in the guise of new ones, because they can buy them at from one-tenth to one-fifteenth of what HORROR STORIES pays for NEW stories. ALL stories in HORROR STORIES, and all other POPULAR PUBLICATIONS are NEW STORIES!

VENUS OF LAUGHING DEATH

By Russell Gray *(Author of "The Singing Corpse", etc.)*

Roy Bishop yielded to the charms of a beautiful phantom of sensual delight—and murdered the thing he loved. . . !

July 9, 10 P. M.

WHO is this woman? A figment of my imagination, of course, for no woman of flesh and blood can possess such beauty.

Does that sound cynical, coming from one who is married to one of the most alluring actresses on Broadway? I think Celine the loveliest being alive; but that woman I saw, or thought I saw, was not alive. Let me try to make myself clear. Her beauty was terrible in its intensity, and so maddening in its voluptuousness that it was not and could not be of this earth.

I saw this other woman when I stepped out of the brook. It is a lovely place,

that brook which cascades into a natural swimming hole less than twenty feet across. Twice a day, during the midday heat before I prepare lunch for myself, and in the cool of the evening, I take a dip there. The sun had already sunk below the hills when, refreshed and invigorated, I clambered to the shore and was about to pick up my towel. It was then that I saw her.

She stood some ten feet from me and she was nude. Somehow I was not astonished at her nudity, for she could not possibly have been otherwise. One could not conceive her clothed. I did not gape, I did not stare; I simply stood there drinking in the ethereal splendor of her body, and I think I trembled.

She stood with one foot slightly forward. Golden hair tumbled over her shoulders and several strands caressed her magnificent breasts which were pointed boldly at me. Directly overhead pale evening stars twinkled in a baby-blue sky, and beyond her, oak trees rose straight and tall. That scene might have been a painting by a master, but no artist had ever had the mind to conceive a woman like that.

I think I stepped toward her, although I was not aware of moving. Irresistibly she drew me to her, and at the same time a great fear of her possessed me. Her arms rose slightly as if to embrace me when I was within reach, and I knew that no man had ever achieved the joy that I would find in her arms. Yet I was terribly afraid.

Then she laughed. Writers, including myself, have used the phrase *golden laughter*. But human ears had never before heard laughter that was like gold in all its richness and dazzling brilliancy. Her laugh was like that. Her arms and the splendor of her body beckoned to me and she laughed—and I had a sensation of sinking, sinking in a bottomless abyss.

What roused me from the trance that was drawing me to her I cannot say. Perhaps I became suddenly aware of my own nakedness. I had been swimming without clothes, but for a time after the dazzling sight of her, I had not been aware of my own unclad body. All at once a sense of shame overcame me, and I turned to snatch up my towel.

When I looked up again, she was gone.

Now as I sit here in my cabin writing this about an hour or two later, I realize that the whole thing was imagination.

A week ago I had come out here to finish my play. Perrin, my producer, was anxious that the play be ready in time for early fall production. Work on it had not been going well in the city. There were too many distractions, not the least of which was my wife Celine. It was important that I get away by myself for a few weeks, and Perrin had rented this place for me at his own expense. I was six miles from the nearest town, and Perrin had insisted that I not take my car. He had arranged that food be sent to me from the village every two days.

"Now you'll work, damn you!" Perrin had said. "You'll have no excuse now for not finishing that play."

I worked. The second act is completed and I am well in the third act. Perhaps I am working too hard. I ought to take a day off. Perrin is a damn slave driver. Why didn't he at least let me have my car so that I could go into the town for a drink or two and some companionship? No wonder I am beginning to see things, have visions of beautiful women.

I am lonely. That's the trouble. Lonely for Celine. God, how I love that woman! How I want her! How lovely it would be here with her.

She was here with me for one afternoon. She drove me here in my car. We went swimming together in the brook and later we lay on the rocks under the sun. It was grand.

As a writer whose business it is to

know how people react to certain stimuli or lack of stimuli, I realized that the vision of that woman at the brook was caused by my longing for Celine. To me Celine is the perfect woman, and so my hunger for her conjured up before my eyes the perfect woman.

But why didn't she look like Celine? And there is something else—the laughter. It could have been the wind in the trees. It could have been, that first time. But not the second time.

For a little while ago I went back to the brook. I was drawn back there as if by a magnet; and within me there was a struggle between that part of me that yearned for another sight of her and a part of me that feared to see her again. I cannot explain it, but there it is.

She was not there, and an overwhelming sense of regret possessed me. Then I heard the laughter. It came from the trees, and it was laughter of pure gold. I swear it was not the wind or any night bird. It was laughter from a human throat, yet not like any sound a human being has ever made.

I stood listening, trembling in the grip of a strange passion, until the laughter melted away into nothingness.

And now I am in my cabin, writing this, telling myself that the vision of the woman and the laughter was caused by a lonely and overworked imagination. I tell myself this, but I do not believe it.

July 10, 12 Midnight

She is real. That is, she is a creature who can be felt, who can rouse fiery passion comparable with her beauty, who has lips capable of kisses which draw the very soul out of one's body. All that I learned this evening.

When I went for my dip in the brook this evening, I wore a pair of bathing trunks. Silly that, I told myself; to wear trunks when there was nobody within miles of the place. Nevertheless I wore trunks.

And when I stepped out of the brook she was there.

The perfection of her body was a thing of wonder. And every curve of her, every voluptuous contour, was eloquent with invitation. As in a dream I went toward her. Her arms moved up, lifting her high breasts. Her lips parted in a half smile. She came forward to meet me, yet she did not seem to be walking over the ground. It was as if she floated over the ground—and then, suddenly, she was in my arms.

Words were never intended to express the rapture that came over me when I felt her body against mine. My blood boiled like liquid fire, and I experienced physical pain which I enjoyed in its very acuteness. I pressed her against me, desired to crush her against me. I felt her teeth in my shoulder, felt warm blood trickle from the wound she made. And there was sweet pain in the wound, and I moaned with pleasure as she bit me again.

The touch of her had made me into a sort of unclean beast. I did not know it then. I would have been glad to die then, if I could have died in her arms.

Then she kissed me. Kissed? I call it that for want of another word. She pressed her lips against mine, and through my lips she drew the very core of my being.

I remember sinking to the ground with her; and then I remember opening my eyes and she was gone. I lay there weak and exhausted, and a long time passed before I had the strength to arise. And as I walked back to the cabin, I heard golden laughter behind me.

I came back to the cabin about twenty minutes ago. Strength has returned to me; but there is something else which I feel I cannot regain. And that is something that was clean and decent which she stripped from me.

What is she? An evil dream, I keep telling myself. But on my shoulder there are the marks of her teeth.

July 11, 7 P. M.

Last night, shortly after I finished writing the above entry, I set out for the town. I craved human companionship and a drink. I knew that I would not be able to sleep that night.

I walked the six miles to the town along the little used tar road. A flashlight lit my way. As soon as I reached the town, I made for the nearest saloon and started to drink scotch and soda at the bar.

I was on my second or third when a young man tapped me on the shoulder. "Pardon me, aren't you Roy Bishop, the playwright?" he asked. "I heard you were living in the cabin at Balsom's Brook. My names Arthur Hill. I'm reporter for the Haytown *Bugle*. How about an interview?"

I said all right and invited him to have a scotch and soda on me. After I had answered his questions, I thought of a question to ask him.

"Say, you ought to know this place pretty well," I said. "Does anybody live near my cabin?"

"Nobody within two miles."

My head was already a little foggy from the drinks. "I see," I mumbled. "Then the girl. . . ."

"Girl?" the reporter said. "What girl?"

"Nothing. I just thought—Well, I saw a girl at the brook a couple of times. Very beautiful. I thought—"

The reporter had started to raise his glass to his mouth. The glass stopped in midair. "My God!" he said.

I looked at him inquiringly. Slowly he drained the glass. Then he said: Did you see her near the falls at the place in the brook that's a natural swimming hole and was she stark naked?"

"That's right."

"My God!" he repeated. He ordered another drink and so did I. "I didn't believe it," he said. "But now you saw her."

"What is it, man?" I demanded, exasperated. "Why shouldn't I have seen her?" Who is she?"

"She was the daughter of a man named Robinson who had a farm where the cabin you're living in now stands. Fifty years ago she drowned herself in the brook."

"What!" Suddenly I was afraid.

The reporter nodded. "The thing's more or less forgotten now, but I had reason to look it up last year. It seems that this girl who was supposed to be very beautiful was madly in love with a young man. Her father forbade her to see him and in grief she drowned herself. The story goes that in the evening, just as the first stars come out, she appears. It was evening when she drowned herself."

I leaned against the bar for support. The glass in my hand shook, spilling some of its contents.

"The story has been practically forgotten," the reporter went on. "In fact, when Old Robinson, a farmer who lives up the road a way, happened to pass the swimming hole one evening and came upon a naked woman standing there, his only reaction was that of being scandalized. Said it was an outrage the way modern girls went swimming stark naked. What caused me to dig up the whole story was when the poet committed suicide in the swimming hole last summer."

I looked up at him and said nothing. My throat was parched in spite of the drinks I had had. I called for another scotch and soda.

"He wasn't much of a poet," the reporter said. "If I mentioned his name, it wouldn't mean a thing to you. He was rich and had romantic ideas. When he saw that place, he bought it and had the cabin built. We didn't see much of him. He'd come to town only for supplies. What struck me as being strange was that he became increasingly thinner and more haggard.

"One day his body was found floating in the swimming hole. He'd been dead for some days. He hadn't drowned, that was sure. A man who couldn't swim a stroke couldn't drown there, if he didn't want to. And then when I looked through his papers, I saw that it was suicide. The last poem he'd written, which was still on the desk, told of how he would let the cool waters close over his head, and in that way he would both escape the girl and join her. A poet's paradox, you see what I mean?

"It didn't mean much to me until I read the other poems and until I looked up the fact about the Balsom girl's suicide fifty years ago and the stories about her reappearances. He had a habit of dating his poems, and the first he'd written were the usual third-rate tripe about love and the flight of time and all that.

"But then suddenly their mood changed. They were ravings of a madman, and they were about a gorgeous naked woman to whom he made love every evening. He recognized that she was not alive as other women are alive, that her passion was too terrible for a mortal man to endure, and that she was robbing his soul."

The reporter paused and took a deep drink. "There it is," he said. "I never wrote that part of it in the paper. People around here think that a poet's naturally crazy anyway, and they'd think the same of me if I took his ravings seriously. It's all hokum, of course."

Then he turned to me and said: "So you saw her."

We were both drunk by that time. There were green rings under his eyes and I saw that he was frightened. "So you saw her," he repeated.

And I replied: "God help me, yes!"

I awoke this afternoon with a frightful hangover. I have a splitting headache. How I returned home from the town I do not remember. The battery of my flashlight is almost dead. On the table I found three quart bottles of scotch which I had brought back with me. To have carried them those six miles through the dark without breaking them in my drunken state must have been close to a miracle.

I am still thirsty. I just took another drink, knowing that I ought not. If I had any strength of will I should smash those bottles. Drink interferes with my work. I have wasted the day. It is nearly evening and I have not yet written a word.

Nearly evening! Soon the first stars will appear, and with the stars will come that creature who is the most beautiful thing the earth has ever seen. The most beautiful and the most evil.

I must stay in the cabin. She will not come to me here. Here in the cabin I am safe from her.

From the window I can see the sun sink. In a short time. . . .

Please God, don't let me go! Celine, my dear wife, whom I love more than life, let your love reach out to me and keep me from arms so unspeakably evil . . .so unspeakably lovely!

July 12, 7 P. M.

Last evening I went to the brook, and there the woman was waiting for me and received me in her arms.

That stark sentence tells basically what happened, yet it tells nothing. God, how I struggled with myself to stay within the sanctity of the cabin! How I fought to keep my feet from moving in the direction of the swimming hole when the first stars of the evening appeared!

It was useless. As the sun sank lower and lower, greater and greater grew the unholy desire for that woman who had killed herself fifty years ago and whose beauty is the beauty of the damned. I thought of the magnificence of her nude body, of those burning lips which kissed as no woman had ever kissed, and I was

doomed. I could no more keep from going to the brook to meet her than I could keep myself from breathing by trying to hold my breath.

Evening again approaches, and already the struggle is going on within me. The struggle between that part of me which is innately decent and loves Celine, and that part of me which lusts for the woman of the brook and glories in that lust.

All day I guzzled scotch. I did no work. A terrible weakness possesses me. It is as if that woman drained life from me last night.

Woman, did I say? It is an abomination for which I lust, a thing dead fifty years, a creature horribly vile which is drawing me down into the pit of hell! I know this. I know this and I do not care. The eagerness to take her in my arms is greater than it was last evening. And tomorrow it will be greater still.

I am doomed.

July 14, 1 P. M.

I shall run away—if I have the strength to walk the six miles to the town. It is my last chance, my only chance. I am so weak that I have hardly the energy to punch these typewriter keys.

Now I know why she comes for me, what she did to that poor poet who killed himself yast year. She draws precious life fluid from me to nourish herself. Without it she would revert to the corrupt matter of a corpse fifty years dead.

I am powerless against her. Even now as I write this I am on fire with lust as I think of her. And in the end, when I am so weak that I shall have to crawl to the swimming hole to keep my unholy tryst with her, I shall still go to her.

Celine can save me. I know that if I can flee to the city and feel the sweetness of Celine in my arms, together we will be able to fight the power this devil-creature holds over me.

I must leave at once, before evening approaches and my resistance lessens. Help me, Celine!

July 14, 10 P. M.

This afternoon I walked to town. Many times I was forced to rest by the side of the road, for my weakness was great. In the town I inquired when the next train to New York left. Five-thirteen, the station agent said. It was not quite four.

I went to the post office to pick up my mail. There were several letters from Celine. She wrote every day, and yesterday she had written twice. She was worried. Her last letter was frantic. Why hadn't I written? The last letter she had received had been dated July 9. Was I ill? Was there—and here she became vague, but her meaning was clear enough—was there another woman?

Another woman! I laughed aloud with bitterness.

But in a few hours I would be back in the city. I would be with her and feel her loveliness in my arms; and everything would be as it was before.

Yet when the five-thirteen train to New York pulled out of the station, I was not on it. I stood on the station watching it leave, and I sobbed with anguish.

I had not been able to board the train. I tried. God, how I tried! But I was not master of myself. I bit my arms till blood flowed, I cursed myself inwardly, but to no avail. I could not get on that train!

Then I knew that this was the end. Inexorably the fierce lust raging within me was drawing me back to the swimming hole.

"Celine! Celine!" I called aloud in despair as I walked back to my cabin.

I did not walk. I was drawn back. I held back the motion of my legs, but my legs moved. And I was doomed.

Perhaps if I could kill her! Perhaps if I could gather mastery of my will for that single moment necessary to crush the life from her. If she could be killed!

Anything that had warm flesh and blood which could sap the life and strength from a man could be killed. She had stolen life from me and part of her lived. That part of her I would kill.

I picked up a thick live oak branch. As I walked I trimmed it with my knife. It could crush a skull like an egg shell.

It was dark when I reached the cabin. It was late, but she would be waiting. By the overwhelming passion which sent tremors through my body, I knew that she awaited me at the brook.

Straight past the cabin I went, and there in her accustomed place near the swimming hole she stood. She was turned a little away from me. I trembled at the gorgeousness of her nude body. The stars had never looked down at a creature more beautiful.

I shut my eyes. I must shut out her beauty. For one single moment I must fight to be absolute master of myself.

"Now!" I cried. I opened my eyes and rushed forward. With the frenzied strength of a madman I brought that club down and on her. I shouted with joy as I saw her skull split and blood flow. She sank to the ground. Like a wild mad thing I clubbed that splendid nude body into a pulp.

So now I am free! Over and over I repeat that to myself. Weary and exhausted I am back in my cabin at my typewriter, picking out the keys which say: *I am free!*

What is that I just heard from the direction of the brook? Is it laughter? The pure golden laughter which has become the most dreadful sound on earth? I strain my ear. Is that her laughter that I hear?

Her physical being is dead. I know, because its bloody pulp lies out there.

There it is again—the laughter of pure gold. Is it the wind? Is it imagination?

She is dead and I am free—but I am horribly afraid.

July 15, 8 A. M.

In a few minutes I will step into the swimming hole and let the cool, comforting water close over my head. Drowning, I have heard, is something like falling asleep, and I am tired.

Last night I did not sleep. There was the memory of that golden laughter and there was fear gnawing at my head. At dawn I arose. Had I really slain the physical body of that creature or had it been only a dream?

I walked to the brook, and there in the morning light lay the huddled bloody heap. I went closer, and then I cried out. The hair was not golden; it was brown!

I rushed forward. *That bloody corpse had once been the vibrant adorable white body of Celine!*

I fainted. For a long time I lay in a stupor. A short while ago I recovered and returned to the cabin to put my affairs in order.

It is important that I make this final entry in my diary. It will explain to the world that I did not murder Celine, whom I love more than life. Then I shall drown myself. I killed Celine, yes, and it was my hand that wielded the club which crushed her loveliness; but her blood is on the hands of that creature from hell.

On the road I found my car which Celine had driven up from the city. It was parked a little beyond the point where last evening I had turned from the road to the cabin. In the darkness I had failed to notice it. At the brook, near where her body lay, was a neat pile of her clothes.

She had been worried because I had not replied to her letters. She had driven up, had reached the cabin just as night was falling. While waiting for my return, she had taken a dip in the brook to cool herself after the hot, dusty ride. And then I. . . .

Perhaps in that other world where I am going to meet Celine she will under-

stand and forgive, for her heart is big. . . .

I must no longer delay. In a few short hours it will be evening, and then will come the call of that abomination in the guise of a woman. The water of the brook when it closes over my head will be cool . . . will be restful.

* * *

Lead story in the Haytown *Bugle* by Arthur Hill:

JULY 18.—The dead bodies of Roy Bishop, well-known American playwright, and his wife, whose stage name was Celine Auburn, were found near Haytown this morning. Police state that Bishop murdered his wife and then drowned himself in Balsom Brook.

Miss Auburn's skull had been smashed in by a heavy oak branch. Her nude body lay crumpled near the swimming hole. Roy Bishop's body was found in the water. He is the second writer to drown himself in Balsom Brook. . . .

The playwright lived alone in a cabin. He was completing a play intended for Broadway production this fall. The stage star had evidently driven up from New York to visit him.

Police were puzzled by the fact that Miss Auburn's clothes were neatly piled near her body, until they read Bishop's diary which was found in the cabin. In the last entry, dated July 15, 8 A. M., Bishop admitted having murdered the actress the previous evening as she was about to step into the swimming hole and asserted that he was about to kill himself from remorse.

Sheriff Allerson of Haytown, after a perusal of the diary, stated:

"Either the man was insane or else he left this diary behind as an alibi to prove in court that he was insane at the time of the murder. It could have been written at one sitting immediately after the murder. The diary is filled with mad ravings about a woman he imagined, or said he imagined he made ardent love to every evening. He believed that she was the daughter of a farmer named Robinson who farmed that land about fifty years ago. Legend has it that she committed suicide fifty years ago and has haunted the brook ever since.

"Another possible explanation is that he was insane, his condition was brought about by overwork or loneliness or drink. Perhaps excessive use of alcohol during the last few days had worked on his imagination to the extent where he actually believed that he saw a ghost woman. Witnesses have stated that several nights ago he had appeared in Haytown very drunk. Three quart bottles of scotch were found empty in his cabin. He was either a clever-cold-blooded murderer or he was mad."

That is the official explanation of the murder and suicide. But not everybody accepts it. William Jefferson, a farmer living near Balsom Brook, who was at the scene of the murder while the Sheriff read the diary aloud, said: "You can't tell me anything about Balsom Brook and the Robinson girl. I been living here thirty-five years and by God—I seen her more than once."

Sheriff Allerton snorted at that and turned away from the farmer in disgust.

Roy Bishop is the author of such well-known plays as. . . .

DISTURB NOT THE DEAD

By George Edson *(Author of "Love's Blood Potion", etc.)*

Not even the staunch common sense or the rugged righteousness of Fighting Jim Kimball, Mayor of Fairville, could cope with the eerie power of the corpse-things whose mysterious nocturnal raids left the city's fairest daughters on deserted streets—tortured, maimed, and ravished . . . !

CHAPTER ONE

The Corpse-Things Strike

"HE THOUGHT he heard a groan from one of the coffins!"

The exclamation came from Joan, elder of Mayor Kimball's daughters.

Tom Farley nodded grimly. "And, believe me, I had to do some tall arguing to get the rest of the diggers to open any more of the graves. For a while no amount of logic would convince them it had just been his imagination."

Mayor Kimball gave a disgusted grunt.

The three of them were in the living room of the mayor's house. Also present were Wilbur Murdoch, one of the mayor's oldest friends, and Wally Denton, whose father had been another friend.

"Fighting Jim" Kimball, as the mayor was known, a burly man of fifty-odd with a square face and keen grey eyes, had sat hunched in his chair while Tom related the incident of the afternoon. Now he hurled his still partly unsmoked cigar into the fireplace. He rose and paced impatiently back and forth across the room.

A Blood-Chilling Novelette of life that came after death

"Blast it, I'd hoped nothing would happen to feed the absurd superstitions already started about those corpses coming back to life if we moved their coffins!"

"Why are you so sure the superstitions are absurd?" Wally Denton murmured.

"Wally!" Joan said sharply.

Tom glared at the languid figure draped on the couch in the corner.

But Kimball didn't even appear to have heard the question. He continued talking as if to himself.

"For years I've planned on a dam to back up enough water for all the power the city needed. We've been in the clutches of the piratical Northern Electric Company too long. Finally I got Tom Farley to have his outfit make a survey of possible sites for the dam, give me estimates on cost. Armed with his reports I went before the people and there was almost unanimous approval for my project." The mayor fixed his gaze on Murdoch. "I'll wager there weren't more than twenty people besides yourself, Wilbur, who didn't approve—and most of them had obvious axes to grind."

Murdoch, a gauntly built man with dour features, scowled at his friend.

"I still don't approve," he grunted, "but the only axe I'm trying to grind is your own welfare."

Tom glanced toward him. He wondered about that last statement; somehow the man had never impressed him as being one to worry much over the welfare of anyone except himself. It had occurred to him that some of Murdoch's wealth might be invested in Northern Electric.

"I think you're bucking opposition too strong for you," Murdoch muttered.

Mayor Kimball snorted. Then, dismissing his friend with a shrug, he went on:

"The work was started. Everything went fine until Farley began to have the coffins shifted from the old cemetery to a new place because we were going to have to flood that whole district. Somebody started a bunch of fantastic stories about the terrible consequences of disturbing the dead—and now half the people in town are terrified."

Returning to his chair, Kimball sank into it and heaved a sigh. "Well, the shifting of the coffins'll soon be done. And when people realize they're still safe they'll forget their crazy fears."

The clock on the wall struck seven.

Tom glanced at Joan, said: "We'd better go get that dinner I promised you."

She smiled, nodded. He rose to get her coat—and suddenly froze.

From upstairs had come a shrill shriek!

FOR a brief instant, while that shriek reverberated through the house, there was numbed silence in the living room. Then Joan uttered a choked cry.

"Beulah!"

Even as she gasped her sister's name, Tom lunged toward the door. In the hall he whirled to the stairs and, with the others behind him, pounded up them. He saw Beulah running down the corridor from an open doorway.

"What's the matter? What happened?"

She stopped when she reached him, cringed against him. For a moment she couldn't seem to get words out. Then: "At my window—a head! Oh God, it was horrible! It—it was—just a skull!"

"A skull!" echoed Joan, who had been right behind Tom. "You must have imagined it!"

Tom swung the girl into her sister's arms, ran on along the corridor to the bedroom with the open doorway. He flung up the window, which gave on a small balcony, and found that empty. Nor could he see any prowler fleeing across the lawn toward the street. He returned to the gathering at the top of the stairs.

"Nothing," he told the mayor.

"Of course not," Mayor Kimball muttered. "It was purely imagination. Those silly superstitions've got even her."

Wally Denton murmured something in a sardonic tone, too low to be clear. Again Tom glared at him. Denton's twisted mind, though clever enough to have enabled the man to pain several artistically brilliant pictures and write a couple of witty plays, irritated him. Be-

sides, he didn't like the way Denton was smirking at Joan. . . .

In the end they persuaded Beulah the whole thing had been her imagination. And finally, embarrassed because she had appeared childish, she hurried back to her room to finish primping for her evening's date.

The others returned to the lower hall. Tom got Joan's coat from the living room.

"I'm not so sure there wasn't somebody at that window," Murdoch remarked just as they were ready to leave.

Kimball laughed.

"Good Lord, don't tell me you're getting the jitters about corpses rising from their coffins!"

"Of course not," Murdoch growled. "But I've kept telling you from the first I thought this project dangerous. I wouldn't put it past the men at the head of Northern Electric to try to ruin you. Then there's Sam Rosan. He'd like to be rid of you, Jim. He can't run his rackets with—"

"You bet he can't!" Fighting Jim Kimball rapped, jaw out. "And neither will Northern Electric stop this dam!"

"Good, sir!" Tom said enthusiastically.

Murdoch shrugged in resignment.

"Did—did you mean you believe Dad may be in physical danger?" Joan asked Murdoch anxiously.

Murdoch gave another shrug, murmured: "Who can tell?"

"Of course I'm not," Kimball snapped. "Neither Sam Rosan or Northern Electric would really dare to pull anything." He turned to Joan. "Now go along to your dinner. Have a good time. Forget all such rubbish."

Joan didn't look convinced but finally she let Tom take her to the door.

DURING the drive downtown he tried to banish her worry about her father. "Good heavens, honey, no one's going to hurt him," he told her. "Just as he said, the men at the head of Northern Electric wouldn't dare to try anything. They'd know they'd be the first suspects. And what good would it do 'em? The dam would still be built as your father planned."

"What about Sam Rosan?" Joan asked. "He could get control of the city if he could get rid of Dad."

"Not if he just got rid of him," Tom disagreed. "Because then your father's reform party would be even more powerful—with him a martyr. No, Rosan's only chance to oust your dad would be to discredit him. And he's tried that enough times without any success."

In the end he convinced her there was nothing to worry about. Thinking she still needed to be distracted, though, he took her to a gay restaurant and a gay show.

It was after eleven when the show ended and they began to walk toward the side street where they'd parked their car. The avenue was strangely deserted for such an hour, but when they reached one of the little parks scattered along beside it they found the space crowded. Somebody was giving a speech.

Curious, they wandered through the gate to the edge of the throng. The speaker, a pallid individual who stood above his listeners on a bench, was saying:

". . . and now for a project which you can be certain would actually only benefit the mayor himself, he commits the final outrage—desecrating the dead!"

A low murmur ran through the crowd.

His expression becoming ominous, the speaker continued: "And he who desecrates the dead shall be doomed! Yes, friends, he and all his kin. The curse of the outraged dead shall be on them!"

For just an instant, despite his logical mind, Tom felt icy fingers clutch his heart. His hand tightened convulsively on Joan's arm. Then he grunted in dis-

gust at himself. What the hell was the matter with him?

"The cops ought to stop such crackpots," he muttered. "Let's go. We don't want to hear any more of this bunk."

"But the dead, if this man is allowed to persist, will not only rise to smite him and his!" the fanatic hammered as Tom finished speaking to Joan. "They will wreak their havoc on all those who have allowed him to persist—I mean on *you—every one of you!*"

Another murmur ran through the crowd, more ominous.

Tom had swung Joan around, pulled her toward the gate. Before they reached it, however, his angry gaze happened to flick over a few of those standing apart from the main crowd. And suddenly hard little lines furrowed the corners of his mouth. One of the bystanders was a pudgy man who puffed complacently at a fat cigar, his face drawn into a satisfied smirk. He wsa the politician whose graft had been stopped by the reform party under Fighting Jim Kimball—Sam Rosan.

"So that's it!"

Just as Tom growled that, slowing a little, Sam Rosan seemed to feel the gaze on him. He turned his head. First his tiny eyes took in Tom and Joan together; then, growing bright with admiration, they lingered on Joan only. Slowly his glance ran down her body.

Furious, Tom dropped her arm and started toward him. But Joan acted quickly, hurried in pursuit, caught one elbow.

"No—please, Tom!"

He halted reluctantly, fists still clenched.

"Let's go along," Joan begged huskily.

Tom drew in a slow breath. Finally, though Rosan's mocking leer made him ache to get a poke at that flabby face, he forced himself to respect her plea and turn away.

BUT even outside the park, on their way toward the car again, he couldn't seem to relax. For a block he didn't try to speak. Then, because he could hold them back no longer, words came in a burst.

"The dirty little rat! If I ever catch him looking at you again . . !" He left the consequences to Joan's imagination. "And he's behind all the nonsense that guy's spouting against your father. He's trying to scare them into turning on him. Did you notice them, their faces, their eyes? Uncertain. Something'll have to be done to make them realize they're being fools. The dead rising to smite us—Good Lord! How the deuce can they ever listen to such rot without laughing?"

"Rot—yes, of course it is," Joan said. But she spoke too quickly, too jerkily, almost as if she were trying to convince herself. Tom cast a sharp glance at her.

"You don't mean to say you have any doubt?"

"No—of course not."

They had reached the car. Opening and closing the door for Joan, Tom started toward his side. But abruptly he stopped, whirled. From somewhere behind him had come a muffled moan of agony.

It lasted only a moment, then quivered off into silence. By that time, though, Tom had looked both up and down the sidewalk and seen no one. But beyond the car a little way, between the looming bulks of two dark warehouses, was what appeared to be an alley. It must have come from there.

"Somebody's hurt!" he shot at Joan as he lunged back around the car. "Wait here!"

Just as he reached the mouth of the alley a second moan sounded. He had been right; it had come from there. He dove into the blackness, eyes straining, hands groping.

"Coming! Where are you?"

But before he got any answer he

reached a point where the alley broadened into a large open space. Faint light filtered between two other dark buildings from a lamp on the next street and showed him the woman.

A cold wave of horror surged over him. The poor creature was almost naked, her few remaining clothes hanging in shreds. Her face, that of a young—and once pretty girl, had been fiendishly scratched and bruised. Her eyes were wide pits into hell.

She was stumbling across the space toward Tom, though without seeming to see him, on pitifully wobbling legs.

He hurried to her, caught her just as she finally began to sag, and then, at the closer view, saw the blue pressure marks on the white skin of her body. What atrocity she had suffered was clear. With a snarl of outraged fury he scanned the space in the remote hope of spotting the fleeing attacker.

"Tom!" an unsteady voice called from behind him. "Tom—where are you?"

He flung: "Here, Joan!" over his shoulder, and in another moment she was beside him.

"Oh!" she gasped numbly. "Oh, the poor—"

"Take care of her a minute!" Tom rapped, swinging the girl into Joan's arms. He raced across the space to the alley opposite the one through which he had come. Taking it, he soon emerged onto the next street and looked sharply in both directions. Absolute desertion.

Finally reason tempered his rage; he realized that trying to hunt the attacker would only be a wild goose chase and that getting his victim to medical help was more immediately important. So he hurried back up the alley to the open space behind the warehouses.

Joan had pulled off her coat, wrapped it around the almost naked girl now clinging to her and sobbing hysterically. Tom swung across to them. Glancing at Joan before he started to lift the girl into his arms, he realized that something more than plain horror had swept into her eyes.

"Tom!" she quavered huskily. "Tom—she says—she says what attacked her wasn't a—a—"

"It wasn't a man—a living man!" the girl choked. "Its head—just an awful grinning skull! And its hands—horrible bony claws! Oh God, it—it—" A sob constricted her throat for an instant— "it was one of those corpses from the old cemetery!"

CHAPTER TWO

Fleshless Fingers

ABOUT a half an hour later, leaving the hospital where they had driven the girl, Tom again helped Joan into his car. He cast a quick glance at her as he climbed under the wheel on his own side. Her face, he saw, still held that pinched look of terror.

"Listen, dear, you've got to believe the doctor," he said firmly. "The girl had those corpses in the old cemetery on her mind. When the fiend attacked her—and perhaps he did look cadaverous—the shock drove her so crazy that she could imagine anything. The doctor distinctly told us such extreme fancies weren't a bit unusual in these cases."

"I—I know," Joan murmured unsteadily. "But she was so positive—and she kept giving more details."

"A vivid imagination explains all that," Tom told her. "She'd had a detailed picture in her mind of how one of those corpses would look."

Joan remained silent.

Tom had started the car while he had talked, driven a couple of blocks. But now he swung over to the curb, stopped again, twisted.

"Good heavens, honey, you've got to use your reason on this thing!" he ex-

claimed. "You've let the horror of the atrocity make you forget cold sense. Corpses don't rise from their coffins—that's preposterous!"

Joan drew in a long breath, said: "No—no, of course they don't."

"All right. Then a corpse couldn't very well have been her attacker, could it?"

Joan gave a slow shake of her head.

Tom gazed at the girl he loved for a moment after this seige of logic. And finally, in a gentle voice, he said: "We must take you home. It's been a ghastly night, I know, but in the morning everything'll be better."

He twisted back to the wheel, nosed the car out from the curb. Grimness returned gradually to erase the tenderness which had been on his face.

"This is just one more thing to chalk up against Rosan," he muttered. "The bunk he's been having spread doubtless fired that poor kid's imagination. So it's really his fault that she couldn't give the kind of a description the police would need to catch the attacker. Now the fiend can stay free and commit the same atrocity on some other girl."

Tom's hands tightened on the wheel. A thought which chilled his blood had crossed his mind. If, by any remote chance, the next victim should be Joan . . . And despite the improbability, cold sweat oozed from his pores.

IT WAS after one when they reached Joan's house. All the front rooms were dark, but there was light coming from the windows of the mayor's study on the side.

"I'm going in to tell him about the stuff Rosan's spreading as long as he's still up," Tom said. "He might figure that something ought to be done right off."

The study door was open. They heard the mayor talking and stopped down the hall. His words were indistinct, but his voice, Tom thought, sounded very excited. Presently he finished; there was the click of a telephone receiver being dropped to its hooks. They moved on.

Kimball evidently heard them walking along the hall, for he was looking around toward the doorway when they reached it, and to Tom the fact that he had to struggle to appear calm was obvious.

"Hello," he said. And with an attempted casualness which didn't quite click: "Happen to see Beulah this evening, Joan—or know where she was going?"

Tom felt Joan stiffen beside him. One of her hands crept to her throat.

"You mean—she's still out? And you don't know where?"

"Now, now, there's no need to be upset," her father said hastily. "She's all right. I just—well, just wondered."

But joan uttered a tight little cry, swayed toward Tom, a wild expression on her face.

"Oh God, Tom—Beulah . . . that creature. . . .!"

Tom had swept one arm around her waist. He tightened it, murmured: "Steady, Joan, steady. Larry's with her. He can take care of her."

"That creature . . .?" Mayor Kimball repeated the last words of his daughter slowly. He had stopped trying to keep his face calm, let it look haggard, frightened. "So you know about them. I didn't want to scare you if you didn't."

"About—*them?*" Tom rapped.

"Yes, the whole city—hell's broken loose!" Kimball said hoarsely. "In the last hour half a dozen girls have been brutally beaten, ravished. Two old men have been battered almost to death; a helpless old lady, the wife of one, fiendishly murdered before her husband's very eyes! And all the victims still alive—" he hesitated an instant— "all the victims still alive say their attackers were —*fleshless corpses!*"

For a moment silence fraught with

the horror of the gruesome account filled the room. Tom's brain reeled. Half a dozen girls, besides the poor creature he had found in that alley, ravished; two old men battered almost to death; the wife of one murdered—*in an hour*. The same fiend couldn't have committed all those atrocities. And yet all the victims claimed their attackers had been fleshless corpses.

Good God, what hellish horror stalked the city?

"I've been directing a special search for both Beulah and you through every precinct station," Kimball continued in a heavy voice, his eyes going back to his eldest daughter. "I wasn't so worried about you with Tom. But Beulah, with young Larry . . . Two or three times lately they've had some childish quarrel and she's come home by herself." He paused. Then with a husky tremor: "If—if she should be coming home alone tonight . . ."

"We've got to find her!" Joan said jerkily, frantically, twisting toward the door. "Hurry, Tom, and—"

The telephone jangled harshly.

With an eager lunge Mayor Kimball grabbed it. He yanked the receiver from the cradle.

"Yes . . . have you found her?"

The voice coming over the wire was only an incoherent crackle to Tom; he watched Kimball's face for the answer. And he saw the sudden hope which had sprung into the mayor's eyes fade, the haggard lines reappear around his mouth.

Joan, also watching breathlessly, evidently noticed the same things. She uttered a little cry of disappointment.

"Yes, I'll wait here for the commissioner," Mayor Kimball said finally in a dull tone. "You can have word relayed that my daughter, Joan, is home. But continue the search for my other daughter—and let me know the instant you have news . . . Goodbye."

He hung up.

"THEY haven't found her," he muttered. "But another girl has been ravished. This one, the police sergeant says, is sure to die from the effects of her terrible beating . . . Oh God! Beulah . . . !" That last was a broken sob.

"Quick, Tom, we've got to find her!" Joan choked. And she spun again, raced to the door, down the hall.

Tom dashed after her.

"For God's sake, Joan, don't you go!" her father shouted. His chair scraped, clattered to the floor. In another moment he was also pounding in wild pursuit.

But she was outside before even Tom could catch up with her. Pulling her to a halt, he panted: "No, you wait here. I'll go."

"I can't just wait!" she told him hysterically. "Oh, Tom, I can't—with Beulah in such horrible danger!"

By now Kimball had reached them. He grabbed hold of his daughter's free arm.

"For the love of heaven, Joan, stay here where you'll be safe! Let Tom go!"

"No, no. I'm going with him!" she shrilled.

And then it suddenly occured to Tom that she might be no safer at Mayor Kimball's house. Of course these creatures roaming the city weren't real corpses risen from their coffins; they were human fiends in disguise. But such a gruesome masquerade must have been conceived as a last desperate method to thwart the mayor's dam project and might, with whoever was behind the hellish scheme seeing an opportunity to get rid of Fighting Jim Kimball and not have him remembered by the people as a martyred benefactor, even extend to an actual attack on him. Then what would happen to Joan?

"All right, we'll go together," he said. Turning to the mayor: "I'll take care of her. You don't need to worry about that." And in a lower tone after Joan pulled away, started on: "You'd better

keep yourself armed until the police commissioner comes. Then you'd better ask him if he can't have some of his men put on guard around the house. I'd stake anything that your dam project is behind all this horror. . . ."

NOW, the city's streets were utterly deserted. But there were people in the first few nightclubs they searched, merrymakers who were no longer making merry, who were obviously staying only because they were scared to leave. They huddled in groups around tables and at the bar, talking in hushed tones, drinking with forced gulps.

Finally, in almost the last nightclub the small city of Fairville afforded, a waiter told them Miss Beulah Kimball had been there with Lawrence Donnelly until shortly after eleven. As they had been leaving, he said, he had heard them exchange some laughing remarks about daring to walk through the old cemetery at midnight.

"Dear God!" Joan husked, horror filling her eyes. "The old cemetery—Beulah!"

She swayed against Tom.

"What's this, what's this?" a mocking voice asked from behind them. "Methinks the lady needs a drink."

Tom knew the owner of the voice without turning—Wally Denton.

"Bring some brandy, waiter," Denton ordered. And moving a little unsteadily around Tom, he took one of Joan's arms.

That made Tom's restraint snap. Many times he had been on the point of telling Denton off, had managed to hold himself in, but now he stopped trying.

"Drop that arm," he rapped. "And get this for future use: Miss Kimball is going to be my wife."

"So?" Shrugging, Denton lowered his hand. Then, leering, he ran his eyes down her slender body. "I'll have to admit you know how to pick 'em, Farley."

Tom stiffened, fists clenching. But Joan was still limply clinging to him, not even seeming to have heard any of the conversation, and he couldn't just thrust her aside to do what he'd have liked to have done with the fists. Denton grinned, swung around, walked away.

Then, almost as if she were coming out of a trance or a faint, Joan quivered erect.

"We might be in time, Tom—we might!" she said jerkily. "Maybe they haven't got her yet!"

"All right, honey, we'll go," Tom murmured. "First, though, I want to call the police. Will you promise to wait right here for me while I do it?"

"Yes, yes—only hurry!"

So he found a telephone booth and put through a call to police headquarters. Telling the officer who answered that Miss Beulah Kimball was supposed to have gone to the old cemetery, he asked to have a couple of men sent there to meet Miss Joan Kimball and himself.

A minute later Joan and he were in the car, heading out of the city.

The old cemetery was a drive of several minutes from the city proper. All during the trip he tried to reassure Joan about her sister, claiming that the creatures surely wouldn't attack her while she was with a husky chap like young Donnelly. Those girls who had been ravished, he reminded her, had been without escorts to protect them. And the only other people who had been victimized had been old.

"Those devils are just hired rats in disguise," he said grimly. "They're fiends—but they're also cowards."

Inside, though, he was plenty worried about what they might find. The fiends were cowards, yes, but probably two or three of them would jump on one man quickly enough. That was why he'd called for the police before taking Joan to such a remote place.

There was no police car by the main gate. But there was another car. It was Larry Donnelly's.

"Beulah!" Joan scrambled out before Tom could stop her. She raced toward Donnelly's car and the gate. "Beulah! Beulah!"

Leaving the headlights on, Tom jumped out.

"Beulah!" Joan kept shouting wildly. "Beulah! Where—" Abruptly she broke off, stopped, stared. And then, recoiling, she uttered a shrill shriek.

Tom reached her, caught her, seeing in the same instant what had caused her horror. The whole inside of him went hollow. A sharp cry burst past his own lips.

For on the ground beyond the second car, throat literally ripped open, lay young Larry Donnelly.

The horror of the spectacle was enough to numb all Tom's muscles. Hammering in his mind, however, was something more—an inevitable question. No knife had been used to rip open poor Donnelly's throat. The wound, with edges of skin hanging in tattered shreds, was far too ragged.

But how could human fingers, fingers whose bones were covered with soft flesh and only thin nails, have made it?

CHAPTER THREE

Joan Vanishes

FOR a long moment he stood motionless, while that fearsome question pounded at him, his taut arms holding the girl he loved. Again shock seemed to have thrown her into a near faint. Presently, though, she began to struggle against his grip on her.

"We've got to find Beulah—we've *got* to find her!" she babbled in a voice cracking with hysteria.

Tom kept hold of her while he twisted his head to peer up the road for the headlights of the police car. He was suffering tortures of indecision. But before he had to decide to take Joan out of the comparative safety of his own headlights, which would prevent any attack being a surprise and give him a chance to protect her against the creatures, or to leave Beulah to her ghastly fate until the police came, two yellow spots appeared.

It was the police car. Four men, their faces strained, got out. They hurried forward.

Joan was still struggling against Tom, still babbling, even more hysterically, about her sister. The officer with the captain's stripes looked at the corpse on the ground, whispered: "God . . .!" and then slowly lifted a pitying gaze to her.

"We'll do our best to find your sister," he muttered. And to his three men: "Get going, boys."

They moved toward the gate into the cemetery with obvious reluctance. Back in their eyes, even back in the captain's eyes though they all tried to hide it, crawled fear.

"I'm going with you!" Joan said shrilly. And turning her haggard face to Tom: "Oh, Tom, I've got to go! I—"

"Of course we'll go, dear," he told her.

"Just a minute," the captain mumbled. "There's something else the lady'd better hear. Her father—I don't know if he's bad off—but he's been hurt. The flash came through as I left the station."

"Daddy—hurt?" Joan husked. Her fingers had tightened convulsively on Tom's arm.

"The commissioner was on his way to your father's with some men to guard his house," the captain continued. "But the—the creatures got to him first . . . I thought I'd better tell you. You can't do anything to help here, Miss Kimball, and you might there."

"Daddy . . .!" Joan sobbed. Then: "But Beulah—she'll need me!"

"I'd better take you to your father," Tom decided for her. "He may need you now — and they'll bring Beulah home as soon as they rescue her." He made the rescue sound positive. "I'll come back and help search if word that they've already found her doesn't come right off."

Joan hesitated another moment, frenzied, torn between desires to rush in two different directions. But finally she let Tom swing her toward the car.

TOM pushed the car for all it was worth and they got into the city in less than five minutes, raced up the avenue to the side street on which the mayor's house stood. As soon as they turned the corner they could see the crowd of people. And as soon as they had parked the car, started through the jam toward the door of the house, they learned the reason for the gathering.

A man with terror in his eyes, but an ugly snarl on his face, grabbed at Joan's arm, rasped: "Tell your father to get those first coffins back to where they came from! Tell him . . . ."

"That's the only way the corpses'll ever return to 'em!" another man, who also pawed at her, shrilled.

"Tell him he's bringing destruction on himself, on you, as well as on us!" the first man continued.

Frowning angrily, Tom pushed both of them aside. He got in front of Joan and opened a path for her.

Now more members of the milling mob, having learned of her presence, began to shout things for her to tell the mayor. Gradually the sound of the shouting rose to a wild racket.

Then suddenly, from very close to them, one hysterical voice screamed above the others:

"Let me at her! Let me at her! He let loose the blood-thirsty creatures who ravished my daughter! Let me at *his* daughter!"

And through the mass crowding around them battered a huge man whose face was twisted with maniacal rage. Before Tom could jump back, stop him, a clawing hand ripped Joan's dress from her shoulder.

Nobody tried to pull the crazed man away. Several voices even urged him on. And his other hand tore at a different part of her dress.

One of Tom's fists smashed the hand up. The other drove to the man's jaw. It connected, hard, rocking him back. A haze blotted out the insane lust for revenge which had burned in his eyes. He sagged to the pavement.

"Poor devil!" Tom muttered under his breath. He flicked a grim glance over the nearest of the crowd to see if there was going to be any more trouble. Evidently there wasn't. He swung an arm around Joan.

A couple of policemen arrived then, elbowing the crowd back, threatening the grumblers with their clubs.

"We came just as fast as we could," one of them panted apologetically. "This mob's tough to handle. But we'll have a bunch more men pretty soon—the commissioner's sent for 'em."

So with one cop ahead, one behind, Tom finally got Joan to the house. A third cop opened the door for them. They rushed in. Hearing muffled voices from the study, they hurried along the hall.

But before they reached the doorway one of the voices, the mayor's, rose to hoarse insistence.

"I tell you their heads *were* skulls! And their hands—they *were* just bones!"

HE WAS lying on the couch, his clothes torn and bloody, his face a sickening mass of ragged gashes. Joan uttered a cry of anguish when she saw him. She stumbled across the room, falling to her knees beside him. She would have tried to take him in her arms if the

doctor, who had been working over a wound in his chest, hadn't stopped her.

"Joan . . .!" Kimball husked. "Thank God you're back! Did—did you find Beulah?"

Joan could only answer with a significant sob.

"Don't you worry, Jim," the police commissioner, a burly man named Logan, told him. "We'll find her."

But in the usually stolid Logan's eyes Tom saw, just as he had noticed in the eyes of the cops at the cemetery, signs of fearful doubting.

There was no response from the couch.

"He's fainted again," the doctor said.

"If he'd listened to me none of this would have happened," a low voice grunted.

Jerking his head around Tom discovered that old Wilbur Murdoch was also in the room. He was standing far back in one corner, face dour, fists clenched.

"You could stop it, Farley, before it goes any farther," he continued when he noticed Tom looking at him. "Whatever this horror is, fake or real, the shifting of that old cemetery's behind it. You're in charge of the job. You've already moved a few of the coffins. Move 'em back. Move 'em back tonight."

"How did you happen to be here?" Tom asked, his voice soft but his eyes hard.

Murdoch glowered, snapped: "What the devil business—" and then stopped. Shrugging, he said: "I came over again for a last attempt to make Jim be sensible."

From across the room Joan's voice faltered: "Will—will Daddy—"

"He'll recover in time," the doctor told her.

"Then I've got to go back to help find Beulah!" And she swayed to her feet.

Tom went to her, catching her arm as she whirled, said: "No, Joan, darling, you stay here. Your father needs you. I'm going back to help them find Beulah."

"I—I—"

"Please," Tom interrupted. He cast a quick glance toward the doctor.

The doctor understood. "Yes, Miss Kimball," he murmured, "your father needs you badly. You'd much best remain here with him."

So she finally consented. But she hurried after Tom when he strode to the door, down the hall.

"Oh, Tom, be careful!" she begged anxiously. "Promise me you will!"

He promised, kissed her tenderly, opened the door. . . .

OUTSIDE, the crowd had grown even larger. The new bunch of cops had arrived, however, and were keeping a clear space in front of the doorway. One of them insisted on elbowing a path through to the street for Tom.

He and the officer reached his car just as another car pulled up behind it. The man who got out, also a policeman, Tom recognized as the captain who had been in charge of the detail sent to the old cemetery. His face looked even paler, even more strained. Horror stared more obviously from his eyes.

Spotting Tom, he husked: "God, I'm glad I found you. I know you said we should bring her here. But—but—"

"But you found her—dead," Tom finished for him in a low voice. It wasn't a question; it was just a dull statement.

The captain had stayed by the police car. Tom had gone toward him as he had spoken. Without saying anything else, the captain turned and lifted a fold of a blanket from a mound on the floor of the rear section.

Tom stiffened. A hoarse gasp tore from his throat when the faint rays from a street lamp showed him the body of Joan's sister.

It was stark naked, but the flesh which had once been a clean white was now red

with blood from a dozen ghastly wounds —wounds, like Donnelly's—that looked as though they could only have been made by some kind of bony claws.

Bruises on her thighs bespoke the vile atrocity she had suffered. Her twisted face, her staring eyes, bespoke the mental torture that atrocity had caused — until merciful death had given her release.

"No," Tom whispered, "no, don't take her into the house. Take her—to the morgue". . . .

For several minutes after the police car had gone, carrying away its gruesome burden, Tom stood there on the sidewalk. His lean face was grim; his hands kept clenching and unclenching. Finally he drew a long breath, strode purposefully back to his own car.

"It must be Rosan," he muttered to himself as he climbed in. "Rosan—perhaps financed by Northern Electric."

He kicked the starter, meshed the gears.

Despite the unnatual type of wounds inflicted on the victims, despite the reiterated vows of people who had seen them, including level-headed Jim Kimball, that the creatures were actual corpses, Tom discarded the idea. Such a thing was impossible—impossible! Besides, would corpses have lusts of the flesh? No, the creatures were human fiends wearing diabolically clever disguises.

And behind them was a human fiend with a very definite purpose.

HITTING the avenue, Tom swung the car downtown. Between narrowed lids his eyes glittered with a steely light. His hands were unnecessarily tight on the wheel.

A few minutes of swift driving along utterly deserted streets brought him to a luxurious house set back from the sidewalk amid spacious grounds. Leaving his car in front, Tom strode up the dark path to the front door. He started to ring the bell, suddenly changed his mind. Faint light sprayed over the grounds from somewhere around the side of the house. With a speculative frown he headed toward it.

The light, he discovered, came through a pair of windows halfway along the side of the house. He advanced to them.

For some reason, as he did, in spite of his conviction that the horrors of the night were far from supernatural, he felt a little shiver prickle up his spine to the nape of his neck. The house, the whole neighborhood, was so silent. It was as if death possessed the place.

Death did.

On the floor of the room into which the windows allowed Tom to look, throat ripped open, sprawled Sam Rosan!

Tom stared numbly for a moment, his breath tight in his lungs, a cold lump clogging his own throat. Then, very slowly, he backed away into the darkness again.

His brain struggled with this startling development. Sam Rosan dead—killed by the creatures. That meant, of course, he hadn't been the power behind them. Then who was?

He frowned thoughtfully. For a minute he considered the possibility of Wilbur Murdoch. He had already wondered just why Murdoch had been so anxious to make the mayor drop his project, had wondered if he might not stand to lose a fortune by the severe blow the project would inevitably be to Northern Electric. But it seemed beyond reason that he would have let the daughter of his oldest friend be murdered, his oldest friend himself almost be murdered. That would have been going farther than he needed to go.

No, Murdoch was out.

Lips pressed grimly together, Tom cut across the lawn to the street and his car. There was still the possibility that the heads of The Northern Electric Company themselves were behind all the horror; they certainly stood to profit from the

result. Oh, they wouldn't actually be running the damned show. They would be sitting smugly at a distance, untouchable, unless a link to them could be forged by confessions from some of the assailants.

But confessions from some of the creatures—first some of them would have to be captured. Tom gave the starter of his car a savage kick. He decided to go back to Kimball's to put a firecracker under the police commissioner's tail.

Hell, the whole force, Logan included, were just scared to death!

So a few minutes later, after driving hurriedly back uptown, Tom again parked in front of the mayor's house. He pushed through the crowd to the door. Only one policeman, he noticed, stood on guard now, and vaguely he wondered where all the rest had gone.

He soon found out.

"Mr. Farley!" the cop blurted as he suddenly recognized him. "Thank God you've come! They're all searching for her but they haven't brought her back yet! Maybe you'll know where she might've gone!"

Jerking taut, Tom echoed: "Where *she* might've gone?"

"Miss Joan!" the cop explained. "She's disappeared!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Death's Masquerade

FOR an instant Tom stood without breathing, the whole inside of him quivering with horror.

"She went in the car," the cop continued to explain to him. "It was a few minutes after the nurse came for the mayor. One of the boys saw her swinging out of the garage and tried to stop her, but he couldn't. She didn't tell anyone where she was going. She just—"

That was all Tom heard. He wheeled and started pushing frenziedly back through the crowd toward his own car.

She had gone to help hunt for Beulah. The cop had said a nurse had come to care for the mayor. So Joan had thought she wouldn't be needed and, not knowing that Beulah had been found, she had gone to help hunt for her.

Gone back where they had been—to the old cemetery!

"Oh God, protect her, protect her!" he prayed silently. "Don't let them get her too! Let me find her safe!"

The half a minute it took him to reach his car seemed like an hour. He leaped in, kicked the motor alive once more, wheeled the car around. He jammed the throttle to the floor.

As he drove, bent forward, his fingers like steel coils squeezing the wheel, his face showed the mental anguish he was suffering. He couldn't help thinking of the way they had found Beulah after the damned fiends had finished with her. And despite his attempts to blot them out, pictures of Joan in that same condition streamed through his mind. Then even worse pictures of her, before death had given her merciful release, in the vile embrace of a corpselike monster his imagination had produced. . . .

"Father in heaven, no—no!" he sobbed aloud. "Let me be in time!"

Though it was already flat to the floor, he pressed his foot harder on the throttle.

Now he had reached the outskirts of the city, was hurtling wildly down the hill into the valley. There was a sharp curve in the middle, but he gave the car no brake, allowed the rear wheels to skid until they bit the gravel at the farther side. In another minute his headlights caught the main gate of the old cemetery.

He drew in a grim breath. Yes, there was her roadster parked just beyond the gate—empty.

He slewed his own car to a stop beside it, jumped out. Racing to the gate, he

plunged through. Then, for a moment, he halted.

He was standing on a little promontory; before and below him, like ghostly sentinels in the errie moonlight filtering through a cloud, stretched the lines of gravestones. He could see no movement, hear no sound. There was nothing to indicate that he had not, in truth, entered a realm peopled only by the dead.

But then, suddenly, he grew more tense. From somewhere he had imagined he had heard the slow, very slow tread of feet. He crouched behind a convenient stone, ears straining harder. Yes, he hadn't merely imagined it. There it was again—the soft pad of feet on damp ground.

It seemed to come from somewhere off to his right. He stared in that direction, eyes narrowed, intense. At first he could see nothing except motionless gravestones, the low bulk of a tomb; but after a moment he saw something else, a shadowy figure, moving along one of the paths. He swung quickly around the stone behind which he had been hiding and ran, still bent low, diagonally across the cemetery toward that path.

Just before he reached it he slowed, slid behind another stone.

The figure, not seeming to have become aware of his presence, kept walking toward him. He couldn't see it clearly yet; a haze had drifted over this part of the cemetery. He supposed it would be one of the fiends masquerading as a corpse. He got ready to jump on it.

But then his eyes widened in surprise. The figure had suddenly emerged from the haze. It wasn't somebody disguised as a corpse. It was a man in ordinary clothes.

And the man was Wally Denton!

IN THE instant of recognition a firm conviction was born. Denton—of course! Why hadn't he thought of him? The man's experience both as an actor and a painter would enable him to make clever disguises. His experience as a playwright would enable him to plot the details of all this horror. And his perverted brain would delight in the atrocities his creatures committed, the terror they inspired.

He was the fiend behind this night of hell!

Now he had come very close. Tom's lean face twisted into a snarl of outraged fury. This was the demon responsible for the ravishing and murdering of Beulah, for what had happened to all those other poor girls, to the helpless old lady! This was the demon responsible for any harm done to Joan! His arms stretching out, he began to straighten.

But abruptly he dropped down again. No, that wasn't the wisest course. For the same reason he had resisted the wild urge to rush into the cemetery yelling Joan's name, because such an action would only have been a warning to the creatures. He must give Denton no chance to shout. The wisest course would be to follow him; it was practically a surety he would lead the way to where Joan had been taken.

That she had been seized by the fiends who had murdered young Donnelly, seized Beulah, was now a horrible certainty in Tom's mind. For were she still free, he knew, the frenzy which had brought her here would have her calling frantically to her sister. . . .

So holding himself back, though it required a desperate effort, for his hands ached to clamp around Denton's neck, Tom watched him pass.

There was no chance to get a close look at his face. In Tom's imagination, though, rose a picture of gloating lips, anticipative eyes. At last, the perverted brain would be thinking, Joan was in his grasp. . . .

After Denton had passed he turned onto another path. Tom waited until he had gone a short distance along that, and then,

following the line of gravestones beside the path, crept after him.

The low bulk of the tomb Tom had seen from the promontory just within the main gate now squatted directly ahead of Denton. His pace quickened a little when he neared it. Yes, that was his objective. Reaching it, he fumbled with the door. There was a creak as the heavy iron swung back on rusty hinges.

Then Denton vanished into the maw of blackness. The door groaned shut.

Tom snapped upright, swung over into the path and ran the rest of the way. At the door of the tomb he paused for just a second to listen, but there was no sound from within. He took hold of the handle and began to ease the door back, careful to avoid any creak.

AT LAST he had an opening wide enough for his body, and still only silence came from inside—only silence with a fetid odor of putresence.

Frenzy clawed at Tom's brain. What had happened to Denton? Wasn't Joan here? An awful chill settled in the pit of his stomach. Or did the silence mean that she was already—dead?

And then, suddenly he heard the mufiled murmur of a low voice.

Quivering with relief, he squeezed through the opening into the tomb. The muffled voice sounded again, from his right. He twisted. The muffled quality, he realized, meant the speaker was separated from him by a wall. Yet the tomb wasn't large enough to be divided into two rooms. There must be—yes, he heard another murmur and knew it had come from below him. There was a crypt underneath the tomb.

Frantically, because every moment might bring even worse than death to the girl he loved, he searched for some sign of access to the crypt. He groped his way across the tomb, back. God, he had to find it! He had to! He felt along the many tiers of coffins lining the walls.

And at last, when failure had driven him nearly mad, he saw the faint crack of light.

It was at the end of one of the coffins. Fumbling wildly around, he found that the coffin swung like a door—actually was a door! He could look down a narrow flight of stone steps into the crypt!

Relief surged over him when he did.

"Oh, thank God! Thank God!" he sobbed silently.

For on the floor of the crypt, the movement of her breast telling him she was still alive, lay Joan.

Then he saw something which gave him a great shock of surprise. A little way from her lay Wally Denton—and his legs and arms were bound!

He couldn't be the power behind the creatures. . . .

Even as Tom stared at him, amazed by this startling discovery, a hollow voice intoned: "So now, for following us here, you will die!" And the owner of the voice walked slowly into sight and toward Denton.

Tom stiffened. Despite the conviction of his reason that the corpselike monsters were merely human fiends in disguise, he couldn't help a shudder of horror. That head did look for all the world like an actual skull with bits of withered skin clinging to it. The hands, of which he just caught one glimpse, did look like no more than bony claws. And the rotted clothes hung loose, in great folds, as if the form inside them must be only a skeleton.

"You will die and become one of us," the creature droned on. "Then you will know the aching desire we suffer for warm flesh of living woman. Then you will know our thirst for warm blood."

Joan uttered a quivering moan.

Tom got set to plunge down the stairs. He must try to save Denton, too, since the man had been making an attempt to

rescue Joan when he had been captured. He couldn't just let him be murdered.

He got set, started down—and then something from behind him crashed against his head. . . .

HE STRUGGLED painfully out of oblivion to find himself on the floor of the crypt. He jerked his head up, forced his throbbing eyes around until they saw Joan. She still seemed to be untouched. She was looking at him.

"Oh, Tom—Tom!" she choked. "Now—now they'll kill you!"

At that he made an impulsive move to rise, go on with his interrupted attempt to rescue her and Denton, but he discovered he was also bound. A guttural chuckle came from somewhere behind him.

"No, my friend, it is useless."

Jerking his head around, Tom saw the loathsome corpselike figure by the mouth of a narrow passage leading out of the crypt.

"You damned fiend!" a voice shouted hoarsely. "God! If only I were loose. . . .!"

It was Denton. And while he shouted he ripped at his bonds—vainly.

The creature gave another mocking chuckle. Then, when a second corpselike figure appeared from the passage, he moved toward where Denton lay.

"Now, after the necessary pause to care for our added guest, we'll resume the little ceremony with you. In there—" and the grisly skull nodded toward the passage—"is a room which has all the contrivances to make death an experience to remember through the long years of eternity."

"You—you—" Denton choked. He kept struggling more frenziedly to break free.

But even while he was still trying to finish the curse, the two creatures grabbed him and dragged him into the mouth of the passage. Just before he disappeared from sight he stopped attempting the curse, cast an anguished look at Joan.

"I tried to save you, Joan—I tried!" he husked. "Forgive me for failing!"

And then he was gone.

"Oh God . . .!" Joan sobbed.

Tom, who had already been testing his own bonds, began to yank harder at them. He must get loose before the creatures returned for him—he must! Now was his only chance to rescue Joan! Frantically he sawed his arms up and down, wrenched them around, while the coils of rope cut into his wrists, and blood drenched his hands.

And at last, for just an instant, the rope seemed to be giving. Wild hope rose in his breast.

Thank God! Thank God!

But then it gave no more. The hope faded, died. Despair took its place.

And across the crypt from him Joan,

who had also been ripping at the bonds holding her, uttered a moan of hopelessness.

THROUGH the passage, suddenly, came a muffled groan of agony. The voice was recognizable as Denton's. The fiends were torturing him. There was another groan, another . . . then silence.

But the silence lasted only a few seconds. Footsteps began to approach.

Tom's throat constricted. They were coming back for him! His chance to save the girl he loved was gone! Again pictures of her being forced into foul embraces by these damned fiends streamed through his brain, making madness claw deeper, deeper. Dear God—Joan who was so clean, so sweet! He tried to muster even more strength to loosen the ropes.

Yet still they held like iron bands.

Now the creatures were in the crypt, stalking toward him. Despite that he kept struggling.

Finally, between Joan and him, one of them stopped. But instead of stopping with him, the other went on to the narrow steps mounting into the tomb above, climbed up them, vanished.

"So now we come to you," the one who had remained mumbled hollowly to Tom.

Staring at the skull from even this close, Tom could see no eyeballs back in those black sockets. Good God, were the monsters really . . . No! That was impossible! Still the last vestige of reason left him wouldn't believe it.

"I think, though, a little ceremony in this room will be more impressive to you," the fiend continued. He chuckled, went toward Joan. Reaching her, he bent down. A quick movement of one of his hands tore the front of her dress, exposing her breasts. A second quick movement left her almost completely naked.

Numb to any pain, Tom slashed his wrists at the ropes. Bracing one hand against the stone floor, he twisted the other around, back, around, back. And again, for just a second, the coils seemed to give a little. Again wild hope brought him the renewed strength to work even more feverishly.

The monster was running his bony hands down Joan's quivering body.

"Yes," he flung over a shoulder to Tom, "it should be very impressive to you to watch the girl you expected to marry play her part in this ceremony. Ah, yes." And a mocking laugh followed the jibe.

Tom, still fighting to break free, suddenly stared hard at the creature. The incredulity which had swept over his face gradually became conviction. Despite the apparently bony hands, the skull, the seemingly eyeless sockets, he had persisted in the belief that the fiend was human. And now. . . .

"By God, Denton, it *is* you!" re rasped.

The corpselike figure stiffened, remained rigidly motionless for a moment, finally shrugged. And in a voice which was no longer hollow: "You've signed your girl's death warrant, Farley. I was going to let her live."

"Wally . . .!" Joan choked.

"Yes—Wally," came the sardonic corroboration. "Your intended husband has just arranged your death by his cleverness in knowing me and his mistake of telling you. I had meant to return to my own identity and rescue you—after, of course, making sure of my reward in advance."

"You damned devil!" Tom shouted hoarsely.

"Oh, quite," Denton agreed with a laugh. But then lust crept back into his voice as he mumbled: "That you know me makes no difference. The ceremony continues. I've wanted you so long, Joan, so long. And tonight. . ."

He yanked off the wierdly contrived gloves which had made his hands look

bony, the headpiece which had resembled an actual skull with such uncanny accuracy.

"And tonight, before you die, you'll be mine!" he finished triumphantly.

He bent toward her. . . .

Madness seized the final remnant of sanity in Tom's brain. Again the rope around his wrists had stopped giving after a little. Again momentary hope faded into cold despair.

There was no chance, no chance. . . .

But suddenly, when he utilized his last ounce of energy on a final series of yanks, the coil eased a bit more.

And a bit more!

He rolled on his side, dug the fingers of one hand into a crack between two stones, tugged against the bonds with the other. Tugged, tugged. . . .

And the hand was free!

Jerking his knees up, he tore at the rope around his ankles. In a moment he had that loose. He clawed to his feet.

Denton evidently heard him for he spun quickly with a harsh curse of rage. He jammed his right hand in a pocket, brought out a gun. But Tom reached him before he could use it. A smash on the forearm sent the weapon scaling from his grip; a smash to the jaw, almost simultaneously, rocked him off his balance.

He tried to catch himself, swung a wild blow which only found Tom's shoulder. Then Tom got to his jaw again. Denton quivered, looking very sick, slowly sagged.

Swaying from exhaustion, Tom gazed down at the limp heap on the floor.

"Tom!"

The shrill cry came from Joan. He lurched around—to see the other corpse-like figure, knife in hand, leap at him!

Frantically he tried to duck. He was too slow, and the blade slashed into him just above the collar bone. Pain burned down his arm, his side. The crypt started to whirl. He made a desperate lunge as his knees buckled, grabbed the creature and pulled him down.

The creature had yanked the knife out for another stab. Through a haze Tom saw the already dripping blade come at his breast. With a frenzied effort he rolled over, caught the arm near the wrist, twisted it. The blade plunged into the fiend's own side.

He stiffened, relaxed, lay still.

Vaguely, then, Tom heard the sound of voices. Groaning, he flicked his clouded eyes toward the stone stairs. He sighed. Thank God! Not more creatures . . . the police.

He let the blackness against which he had been fighting swallow him. . . .

HE RECOVERED consciousness to find himself in a clean white bed. A woman in a nurse's uniform moved across his vision. Then, coming toward him, smiling tenderly, he saw the girl he loved.

She bent over him, kissed him, said: "You're going to be all right soon, dear, very soon. . . ."

A little later he learned the facts he hadn't already known about the night of horror. Denton had given the police a full confession.

Aware that Denton had stage experience and also, a fact which few others had known, that he had lost most of his inherited fortune, the directors of Northern Electric had wired him to put on a show to scare the people into forcing the mayor to drop his dam project. The executives of Northern Electric, however, had never meant there to be any actual bloodshed. But Denton's perverted brain, just as Tom had figured it would, had got a kick out of producing a real orgy of atrocities, using a real city for the stage.

The kind of men he had hired to be the risen corpses—all of whom the police had finally captured—had been plenty willing to commit atrocities.

The cleverest feature had been the disguises Denton had created. The bony hands, Tom had already discovered, were just gloves; they had been crusted with a sort of plaster. The skulls were headpieces Denton had painted. The effect of the eyeless sockets had been achieved by the use of polarized glass, such as is sometimes used for peepholes through doors of apartments, which furnishes clear vision one way and no vision the other.

The starting of the terror, in order to give the later occurrences a build-up, had been gradual. First he had begun the rumors about the fearful consequences of disturbing the sleep of the dead. Then he had hired the digger to pretend he had heard a groan coming from one of the coffins.

From there the hellish drama had rushed swiftly to its top pitch.

Sam Rosan, the police discovered, had instigated all the speeches around the city. He hadn't, however, had anything to do with the atrocities. But suspecting Denton, because he knew of Denton's conferences with the heads of Northern Electric, he had tried to chisel himself a slice of the profits—which had been the reason for his death.

Denton's idea in the crypt, when he had pretended to be captured, had been to fool Joan. He had wanted to pull a heroic rescue. First, though, because he hadn't been sure that even the rescue would make her marry him, he had decided to possess her. . . .

"What I don't undestand," Joan murmured, "is how you knew him."

"By what he said," Tom told her. "Remember the creature seemed to know we'd planned to get married. Well, I'd told Denton in that nightclub—and neither of us had told anyone else in the world."

There was a moment of silence.

"But now we've got to try to forget all this horror," he said softly. "Just look forward to other things."

Joan was silent. There was a sadness in her eyes that would be there for some time, and he knew she was thinking of Beulah. But he knew, too, that time heals all wounds. . . .

THE END

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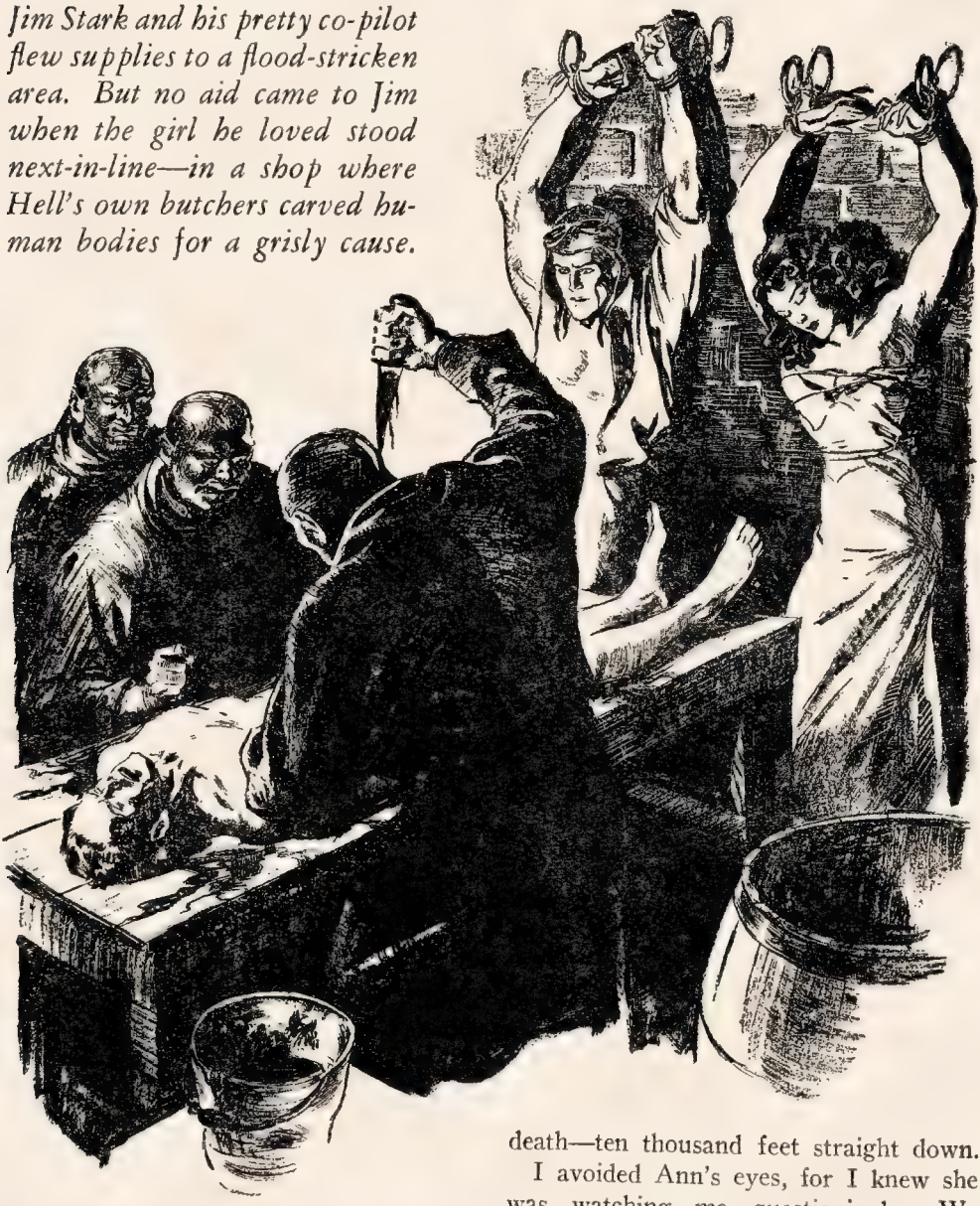
By William G. Bogart

Jim Stark and his pretty co-pilot flew supplies to a flood-stricken area. But no aid came to Jim when the girl he loved stood next-in-line—in a shop where Hell's own butchers carved human bodies for a grisly cause.



MY COLD hand stiffened on the controls, for now I was convinced that there was something horribly wrong.

Rain smashed against the slanting windshield as I tried to penetrate the fog-shrouded night. I knew that somewhere below us was a safe landing field—or death—ten thousand feet straight down.

I avoided Ann's eyes, for I knew she was watching me questioningly. We should have reached the airport half an hour ago, according to our instruments and the recordings which Ann made on the chart in her lap.

Fearfully, she asked hesitatingly, "Jim, I— I— wonder what has happened? I haven't picked up the radio-beam signals for fifteen minutes. . . ."

There was something about the tone of her words which chilled me. I tried not to let uneasiness show in my voice as I answered, "I guess I slipped off the beam. But don't worry, we'll be back on it in a moment." I reached out, patted her small, dainty hand. Then I stole a quick glance out of the corner of my eyes.

Ann's fingers jerked on the microphone which she held in her trembling hand. She was half sobbing, "Plane 21, emergency serum plane from New York, calling Grangeville. We are trying to come in. We have lost your beam. Send out directions . . . ."

Ann held a pilot's license, though on this trip she was traveling in her position of trained nurse. We had left New York City late this afternoon, the plane loaded with serum, morphine compound and drugs for use of stricken flood victims in a marooned little Kentucky town down along the Ohio River. Ann had been handling the radio while I piloted the cabin plane.

There was something sinister, suggestive about the absence of the radio-beam signals. They should have been coming in every few moments. But now . . .

Watching those fog tendrils clutching at the window pane, something which had happened scarcely twenty-four hours ago became vividly significant to me. Just last night, Larry Hendricks, one of our ace pilots, had covered this same course with another plane-load of supplies for the flood victims. The dispatcher in Columbus had been the last one to hear Larry's frantic words. They had come like a voice from the grave, crying frantically, "Something's wrong. The beam doesn't seem right, but I am following it in. I will call you back. I'll—"

And that had been the last *anyone* had ever heard of Larry. Somewhere in this mountainous, isolated country of Kentucky, his plane had crashed. Searching parties had still failed to locate him.

There was something very odd about that. What had Larry meant when he had mentioned that new radio beam? What. . . ?

Not only that, but a week previous Tom Edson—Ann's and my friend—had disappeared in a similar manner!

Ann's trembling fingers were suddenly clutching my arm. Fearfully, she cried out: "Listen!"

She turned up the amplifier so I could hear the signals which were suddenly coming in. It was a long dash, dragged out two or three seconds.

Hopefully, my eyes brightened. We were smack on the beam. If we had been to the left of our course into the airport, the signals would have been a succession of dotdashes. If we had been to the right of it, there would have been a dash-dot arrangement. But when you're riding right on the beam, they become one long dash over the air. And from their intensity, I knew we were close to a field.

Suddenly, I heard the flat, mechanical-like voice announcing through the storm-swept night. "Plane 21 from New York. Come on in. Ceiling two-hundred feet. You will break through fog banks over airport."

At the sound of those words, writhing fingers of ice clawed at my spine. I met the terrified gaze in Ann's brown, staring eyes. She opened her mouth to speak, then just stared at me with a nameless fear.

FOR THOSE words giving us directions had been in the voice of the pilot who had disappeared twenty-four hours ago. There were no indications that there was now anything wrong with Larry Hendricks. And certainly if he had been uninjured in a crash, he would have called one of our fields and reported his whereabouts.

What did it mean, those directions of

Larry's coming through the stormy night?"

Ann's slender, but nicely curved form was taut in the seat beside me as she quavered, "Jim, it can't be he! Everyone's certain that Larry crashed to his death yesterday. I wonder—"

Jagged lighting smashed, it seemed, almost on the nose of the roaring plane. Howling wind caught us up, then sent us rocketing toward the earth. For a moment, I was frantically busy with the controls, but I leveled off.

Then, tensely, I said, "Ann, we've got to go in on that beam. It must be the airport at Grangeville, but how in the world Larry ever got there, I don't know. However, we'll soon find out."

Her hand touched my arm, as she answered tensely, "Yes—I guess we will."

But I was wondering what we would find when we came down to earth. There was nothing but a sea of fog beneath us, and the crashing storm overhead.

Fearfully, I started losing altitude. A sickening feeling crept over me, for I knew that down there below us there were mountainous ridges before we would strike the airport, close to the Ohio River. How much room I had to clear them before reaching the valley, I didn't know. Ann's hands were clenched tightly; her face was deathly pale as I glided toward the earth. Wind whistled thinly through the struts, like a banshee wail through the stormy night. It seemed to tell of things foreboding, sinister.

The radio beam made a roar in the small cabin, then died completely. A moment later it came on again, and I knew that now we were directly over the landing field. I sent the plane into a long spiral, praying hopefully that any moment we would emerge beneath the soupy fog which hung over the earth.

The uneasy feeling that came over me as we dropped lower and lower was not like the fear I had known before while making hazardous, blind landings. I could not explain the feeling, but it was eerie, unearthy.

I dared not meet Ann's frightened gaze. She was watching me in the intervals when she was not staring out through the rain-splashed windows. The storm was slackening though; lighting flashes had been left behind us.

Then she cried out: "Look! There's the field. I see a light."

Luckily, Ann had not seen what I had. We had dropped beneath the fog, abruptly. And it was only by scarce yards that I missed the waving tops of tall trees. I, too, saw the light and it gave me a peculiar start.

Most landing fields are surrounded by red marker lights, but beneath me I saw only a single white light cutting a white swath across the ground. Apparently, it was to help us in landing. But what about those red lights which are on at every established airport? Then I remembered that this field was very close to the flood-swept river; there was probably a shortage of power. That's how I tried to explain the absence of the usual border lights.

Ann's arms still gripping mine intensely, I steeled my nerves to bring the plane down safely. I was thinking of the thousands of dollars worth of valuable serum and drugs in the cabin. One day's delay had already meant many deaths down here in this ravished town. The serums were needed, as were the morphine to soothe the pains of those who had been injured and who had to be operated upon. God knows, if I missed the field there would be more deaths—more horror.

But the field was clear ahead. I saw no more trees. Down—down. . . .

WE HIT the ground stiffly, bounced twice and settled on an even keel. I was now rolling directly into that blinding floodlight. On either side, darkness

smashed in from the surrounding woods which I had noticed as I had maneuvered the plane into the field.

I cut the ignition as Ann exclaimed with relief, "Thank God, Jim! We made it!"

She was already getting out of the seat, her brown eyes bright with excitement. The plane rolled to a stop.

Then, without warning, that brilliant light went out. With the exception of the cabin light, we were surrounded by utter darkness—and silence.

Ann said nervously, "Why did they turn out the lights—" She broke off, as though some intuition had already given her the answer.

I knew something was utterly wrong, yet I tried to speak easily.

I said, "Come on. I'm going to find out." I half dragged her aft from the cockpit, out the cabin door of the plane, on to the sodden earth. Dank mist swirled around us. Far off, I heard faint rumblings of the storm through which we had passed.

Standing there in the darkness, Ann's small hand dug into my arm as she whispered fearfully, "Why, there isn't a person here! I don't understand it. There should be a lot of them here waiting for the supplies we have. I wonder what could be—"

Suddenly I froze, my heart smashing against my ribs. Utterly awful, came a shrill cry rocketing across the otherwise dead calm. It choked off just as abruptly, and in the following silence I was aware of a whispering something closing in upon us. Ann cringed against my side as my arm went around her slender shoulders. She whispered: "God in heaven, Jim! What *was* it?"

I tried to laugh, though I knew the sound coming from my dry throat was a hollow cackle. "Just some night bird, I guess. Come on, let's find the field office." I did not mention that to me that cry had sounded like the hysterical screech of a person gone mad.

I had the flashlight out of my jacket pocket and was shooting its insignificant ray along the ground ahead of us. It was then that I knew this was no regular landing field. There were no runways, and the ground was covered with the stubble of a deserted farm. And yet, we had come in on the radio beam. It had brought us directly here.

The thought gave me a terrible start. Could this beam have been the one which Larry had followed yesterday, and disappeared as a result of it? And yet . . .

We had *heard his voice* just a few minutes ago. Where was he? Why wasn't someone meeting us? Surely, they would be waiting for the serum.

Ann stopped dead in her tracks, clutching me fearfully. She whispered, "Jim, I have an awful feeling that we are being watched—here in the darkness. It is just as though someone—some *thing* were closing in on us. Can't you feel it? Can't you—"

Then her shriek made my blood turn to ice. She was pointing ahead, sobbing, "Look! Did you see that face? It was hideous—awful!"

I swung the light's ray and for a moment I saw a blur of movement. Then it was gone. The rays did not reach quite far enough to outline whatever Ann had seen.

I pushed Ann's form behind me, whispering, "Let me lead the way."

There was a gun back in the plane, but it was too late to go back for it now. I was determined to find out what was wrong here—right now!

Intent on the thing which Ann had seen, I was staring ahead. I had been holding her hand when, suddenly, I realized that it was no longer within my grasp. I stopped, whirled around. Fear clawed at my soul, brought a sob of hor-

ror to my lips and my heart sank.

She was gone! And there had not been a sound!

I yelled: "Ann!"

There was no answer from the sullen night.

FROM somewhere across the black fields, came the sickening, unholy cackle of some foul thing. It was followed by the frantic scream of terror from the girl I loved. Then the sounds were suddenly smothered, as though the earth had closed over them.

Near madness shook me as I started racing, stumbling across the rough ground. The flashlight was of little use. It had been an old one which I seldom used and already the battery was growing weak. Once I fell to my knees, scrambled frantically to my feet again and started racing forward.

After a while I drew up short, groaning. I was only running in circles, with no idea of where Ann had disappeared. I saw nothing further, heard no sound.

High above, black clouds scuttled phantomlike through the night. Down here there was only silence and the soft soughing of the wind. But carried on that breath of air, from far off, there seemed to come a low, gloating chuckling.

Frantic, I tried to fathom its direction, started stalking toward it.

My light picked out the small shack set along the edge of the field. A moment later I reached it and pushed back a sliding door which creaked on rusted runners. Inside, the room was fitted with modern radio equipment. The light's ray flashed over a short-wave broadcasting set, a power unit; a chart spread out on a battered, old desk.

I saw the machine rigged up near the microphone. My eyes swung to a recording disk and understanding came to me. I stumbled across the room, my gaze intent on a still form which was huddled in one corner, deep in the shadows.

A light hit the silent body, and I drew back in horror. It was a man's corpse, and it was twisted, crumpled. Dry blood was caked on a face that had once been handsome.

Feathers of fear brushing across my back and chest, I bent down and stared into that dead face. It was no other than that of Larry Hendricks, once our ace pilot, who had disappeared yesterday!

Appalled, my hand felt over the body and I knew from the varying stiffness of different sections of it, that Larry had been a corpse at least twelve hours.

That fact gave me a sudden start. For I was recalling with horror how we had heard Larry's voice within the past hour!

And what about Tom Edson, our friend who had disappeared quite a few day before Larry? It was Tom Edson whom Ann and I knew really better. It was through him that I had landed the job with the airlines. Later, I had met Ann. It was just two weeks since I had thanked Tom Edson for helping me get this position. Otherwise, I never would have met Ann—this sweet and lovely girl had just promised to become my wife. And now . . .

Oh God—! Where *was* she?

I realized, suddenly, that hot tears were blinding my eyes. I reeled to my feet, started back toward the shortwave transmitter on the desk. For I suddenly knew what we had heard coming over the storm-swept air.

But I never reached that set. I felt the cold, foul presence of something behind me, started to turn—too late!

Something smashed across my skull and I crumpled to the floor, the flashlight clattering across the wooden boards. Again that thing struck, and pain racked through my body. I had a hazy glimpse of features that were as black as coal, with staring, deathlike eyes.

Again the thing lashed forward, and

oblivion settled over me like the bloodless hand of cold death.

SLOWLY memory returned. I stirred experimentally and pain gored through my whole body. Then my groping mind thought of Ann.

I staggered to my feet, a sob welling to my lips. What fiend of hell had planned this trap? First, Tom Edson—our close friend; yesterday, Larry; and now—us!

I started to stagger out of the building; using for light a pad of matches which I found in my pocket. It was then that I saw the rectangular outline on the floor. A trapdoor!

My fumbling fingers clawed for a ring folded back in the planking of the thing, and then I was pulling it upward. I went taut, as hinges squeaked. Fearfully, I stood still, listening. But there was no sound. Only a dank pit of darkness met my gaze, and vague stone steps leading downward.

I found the flash which had been knocked from my hand, and with its feeble ray, started down those steps which were slimy with age. At the bottom, I found myself in an underground tunnel and started forward. Far ahead, I thought I saw a flickering light.

Once, with a start, I imagined I heard a shrill cry. I stopped, tense, listening, my hands groping along the cold, damp wall at my side. The sound was not repeated and I started forward again.

Then I heard cackling voices coming from somewhere ahead. It was like nothing else save the mad jabbering of maniacs. Could Ann be there?. . .

Impulse brought me up short, fear seeking to drive me back. But reason told me that I must go forward, learn what had happened to the girl I loved. I lurched onward.

I reached the end of the passageway and saw that it led to a long, underground room. There were electric lights on overhead. I puzzled about that. All power plants had been disabled by the raging river close by. The nearest town had been completely isolated; without food, supplies, medical attention. There hadn't even been a way for the trapped residents to get *out* of the place.

But just then I heard the steady humming and throb of some machine. It seemed to come from behind a wall, and I realized that it was probably a small gasoline engine driving a portable power unit for these underground lights.

But I soon forgot that as I saw the door which stood open ahead of me. Cautiously, I approached it, peered inside, drew up in horror at the scene which met my bulging eyes.

Towering creatures cloaked in funeral black gowns moved about the room. Splashed over the black background of the robes were smears of fresh blood. But it was the creatures' heads which made me sick with revulsion. The skulls were entirely black, and the only live things about them were the two gleaming spots where eyes were embedded in the coal-like surface.

Even that was nothing, compared to what those grisly, nameless creatures were *doing!*

Each figure that entered the room was carrying a rigid, water-soaked corpse across its shoulders. The bodies were being dropped down upon a long heavy bench—a slab similar to a meat table in a slaughter house—and other creatures were standing there, waiting with upraised, blood-drenched butcher knives.

THE MOMENT a flaccid body hit the table, those gleaming knives slashed downward, and long gashes were made through the abdomens of the cadavers. My blood congealed as I heard those blades rip through dead flesh. Fiendishly, tissue was pulled back, exposing vitals

which were quickly cut clean and dumped into a near-by bucket.

As each body was disembowelled, it was placed at the further end of the long table, and the creatures started to work on another.

Suddenly a voice rumbled through the underground room. But I dared to take a step closer in order to discover whence it came. It was a rasping, commanding voice which seemed to batter from one wall to the other, and it said:

"Hurry, comrades! The bodies must be ready before dawn. The plane is waiting. Remember, there is still the girl's nice body. . ."

Icy horror flowed through my veins. I did not see the thing which had spoken —but I did see Ann!

Dress half ripped from her slender, vibrant form, she was spread-eagled against a far rough wall of the room. Cruel thongs bound her wrists and ankles to great iron hooks embedded in the wall. Full, rounded breasts were crushed beneath rope which held her from sagging forward. For mercifully, she had fainted. The sight of the cord biting into her white flesh was maddening.

Yet it was better that she did not see the butchering of those corpses on the slab across the room. Blood stains smeared the walls and the floor near by. Every few moments, there was a sodden *clunk* as another mass of entrails was carved from a corpse and dropped into the box near the work bench.

Reason almost deserting me, my only thoughts of that dear girl whom I loved so passionately, I plunged through the doorway and across the room toward Ann's slumped form.

But I never reached her. The cackling voice ripped out again, "Hold him."

The shambling, black-cloaked creatures were suddenly closing in on me. Others came from an alcove which I had not seen until I started to cross the room. I fought frenziedly, smashing fists against black faces. One of the robed figures, at least six feet tall, raised a blood-dripping knife high over its head and came slashing toward me.

I whirled, rage driving the terror from my heart. My fist smashed against the creature, and it went reeling backwards.

Again the voice ripped out somewhere in the underground room. It seemed to be coming right out of the wall. "Stop! Hold him! He shall see more. . . . Show him the live ones!"

Clawing hands stopped gouging at my face; and then powerful arms gripped me —forced me back toward the wall where Ann was tied, naked.

Blood-smeared hands touching my taut body made me sick with loathing. Gleaming eyes bored into mine from behind those weird, masklike faces. I screamed:

"Take me—take me! But let the girl go! She has done you no harm! She has not—"

Again, that soft cackling came from somewhere in another room. Frantically, my eyes searched around. Then I thought I saw a small niche high up on one wall of this chamber of horror. The next moment I was rammed up against the wall, close to Ann, and fingers were hastily lashing me to the shackles.

"Show him the live ones!"

Merciful God! What did that statement mean? What horrors were still in store?

Then, I knew!

EVEN as those shambling, black-cloaked things were closing in on me and fastening me to the wall beside Ann, directly ahead my gaze stopped on the crude cage which might have been built to house savage apes of the jungle.

Wild things were trapped within that stoutly built inclosure. They were not animals—but slavering, gibbering *men!*

I strained my eyes to look closer and

then I saw that they were clothed in uniforms—khaki uniforms such as members of the national guard would wear! Some crawled about the floor; others hung onto the cage bars, bleak faces jammed between the bars, eyes gleeful at the sight of the butchered bodies on the work bench.

I screamed: "Good Lord in heaven—"

Again that cackling voice came from the opening in the wall. "See?" it taunted. "You know them, don't you? A certain drug has made them slobbering fools! They shall never be able to talk about me. And before the night is over they shall be prepared—just as these others are being prepared!"

Abruptly, I understood the whole devilish plan behind these butcheries. As my gaze shifted to the work tables and I saw what the cloaked creatures were doing. Bars of gleaming metal were being hefted from boxes which had been ripped open near the tables. A single bar was placed within each open body. Clumsily, crudely, those slit stomachs were being sewed together again, covering the yellowish thing which had been placed inside.

Then, of more gruesome significance, the sewed-up corpses were dragged to another, cleaner table farther along the room. Clothes were being put on the mutilated bodies. They were being dressed again!

My blood flowing through my veins like slushy ice, I recalled the terrible railroad accident which had happened in the Kentucky foothills this very afternoon. Army guards had been aboard that train and now I knew that these poor creatures in that barred cage were men who had been assigned to that special express train. I saw this unseen fiend's deadly purpose. And from where I was shackled, watching those hellish operations, I thought I would go insane myself unless I could get free, somehow.

Close to my side I heard slight moans from Ann's drooping figure. Eyes burning, my head jerked around and I saw her lips quivering. Her eyes opened, stared horribly; then she saw me. Frantic words were whispered, as I believed, only for my benefit. Ann said:

"Oh Jim! What does—it—mean?"

Very softly, I answered tremblingly: "Listen, Ann, there's no time to go into that now. First, we've got to get free! I think I can slip my wrist through this loop. If I only had a gun—"

Ann tensed, and I saw the frantic expression of hope leap into her brown eyes as she answered: "My purse! Down there at my feet! I was clutching it when they dragged me down here and there's a .25 automatic in it. Maybe . . . please try to reach it, dear!"

I took one fearful look toward the grille high in the far wall, from which no voice had come in the past few moments. But I could feel cold, gleaming eyes watching us from beyond that dark aperture.

Muscles quivered in my arms as I threw my weight down on my wrists. Bones crunched together; but slowly, maddeningly, the bonds were slipping over my wrists!

Again, Ann whispered frantically: "Hurry! There's one of those things coming toward me. He's staring so! He's—*Oh, my God!*"

I STOPPED struggling. One of the figures, a tall, scrawny creature, had walked up to where her half-naked body was strapped ruthlessly against the wall. A hand which was smeared with fresh blood reached forward, touched the soft, ivory-like flesh of one of her quivering breasts. Then those fingers snaked over it, crept upward and caressed her curved throat. A panting, lustful sound came from the figure's lips.

Ann draw back with revulsion. But it

was the new expression in her bulging eyes which gripped me. She was staring hard into the creature's own eyes, and suddenly Ann's eyes widened as she sobbed: "Oh, no! It can't be *you!*"

For just an instant, the figure turned toward me as the snarl came from its lips. Then I, too, stared; saw those peculiar eyes gleaming behind the masklike face. And I went rigid—for I had understood what Ann had meant.

Again the figure turned to pawing her body. She moaned with terror. Muscles quivered in my arms as I struggled to free my hands, and they were just slipping free when the high-pitched cry came from behind that hidden opening in the wall.

"Look out! He's escaping—stop him!"

It took a moment for those orders to penetrate the figure's passion-filled thoughts. But in that second, I gave a final jerk. My hands came free, and I fell forward on the blood-wet floor.

My feet were still locked against the wall. But my fingers reached her handbag; slipped off. Again I reached out and clutched at it. This time I didn't miss. I tore it open and the 13-ounce automatic leaped into my hand.

There was no time to untie my feet. The gun leveled in my hand and I cried out:

"Stop! I'll kill the first one—"

The towering creature with the peculiar eyes leaped toward me. I pumped lead twice from that deadly little weapon. A small hole appeared in the black mask.

For I saw now that it was a mask. A trickle of blood came down over the black surface, and I knew that I was now opposing creatures of flesh and blood. The terror in my soul was not quite so great. . . .

The figure that had been pawing Ann's willowy body collapsed with a groan. Fearful, his followers started backing away from me.

Holding the gun with one hand, I hastily unstrapped my feet. Just then Ann shrieked: "Jim! Look out! A panel in the wall over there is opening—"

I lunged upward, my feet free, the little gun steady in my hand. Watching that wall which had started to open, I reached behind me and tugged at Ann's small, bound hands. In a moment she was free, saying, "I'll untie my feet. You watch that—"

A voice rapped out: "Comrades! Seize him—"

I saw the heavy panel which was now open. Then, through the darkness from within it, I saw the gleam of gun-metal. I fired point-blank.

There was a scream of anguish within that niche and something came tumbling outward, crashing to the floor. The figures which had been standing near by started jabbering all at once. One moved threateningly toward me.

STILL holding them off with the gun, and pushing Ann's trembling form protectingly behind me, I moved around the room toward where the figure had collapsed on the floor outside the opening in the wall. I screamed out frantically: "Back! Back—all of you! I'll shoot to kill!"

I said to Ann, "Get into that room behind the door. See what's there. Hurry!"

The figures were edging closer all the time. Again I heard the hum of the motor somewhere outside the room. It seemed to come from the opening to another room in back of the bloody-smeared work tables.

A ray of light came over my shoulder as Ann snapped on a light in the room behind me. I yelled to her: "Lock the door. I'm going to—"

One of the cloaked figures leaped. The gun in my hand spat once. The center of the black mask spurted blood and the figure collapsed back into the arms of

the others. I snarled then: "Back! I'll blast you all to hell! I'll—"

My face twisted with blind fury. I knew there were only a couple of shots left. But these slow-thinking figures didn't seem to understand that. They stared whimpering, backing toward the doorway across the room. I followed them menacingly.

There was a single light turned on within that smaller room. There was a generator outfit of some sort against one wall. I saw no other doors save the one through which the robed figures were backing. And I also saw the heavy steel armpiece which was mounted on this door which opened outward.

Perhaps they thought they were luring me inside after them. I came right up to the threshold of the room; then, suddenly, I slammed the heavy door upon them and threw the steel arm into place. It fitted snugly into slots on either side of the door.

A bedlam of sound broke out from within. I laughed then, somewhat madly, as relief shook my body. I felt a little weak. But my relief was not to stay with me long.

The prisoners in the cage near me were yelling, laughing, childishly gleeful because the masked figures had been captured. The sight of strong uniformed bodies, men who had just yesterday been trained military guardsmen, made me sick with despair.

I took one look at their bleared eyes bulging from behind the bars, then rushed back to Ann. She was standing in the doorway of the small office-like room, papers clutched in her trembling hands.

One of her small hands raised to her rounded breasts as I came close to her, and she tried to cover a trickle of blood which came from a wound inflicted by the tall man with the weird eyes.

"Ann! You're hurt!" I exclaimed.

She shook her head, reached out and handed me the letters. "It's nothing," she said quaveringly. Then she motioned toward the still form of the passion-crazed man who had fondled her. She continued: "Two weeks ago we had a terrible scene. It was when I told him that I was going to marry you. I had never realized that he even gave me a thought; that is—romantically. I didn't tell you, for with all this flood trouble I was afraid it might upset you. It was when I saw his grey and his brown eye behind the mask that I knew—"

I had started across the room. I ripped loose the thin rubberlike mask which covered the thin features of Tom Edson, the first pilot who had so mysteriously disappeared in the flood area. The round bullet hole made a third to a pair of eyes that did not match. This was what Ann had seen behind the mask when our former friend had pawed her. I had noticed it a moment later when the pilot had looked at me.

I STEPPED to the body of the man who had come from the secret room behind the wall. I tore his mask free, too. There was a bullet hole over the bridge of a long, hooked nose. The dead man had the hard, weather-roughened features of the mountaineer type. I asked: "But who is he?"

Ann showed me one of the letters. It seemed the dead director of this horror chamber was the only undertaker in the near-by flood-ravaged town. He would be the one logical person to take over the bodies of flood victims and return them to their homes. Many were men from other states, tobacco salesmen and buyers who were here to bid in on the great tobacco sales made in key towns throughout Kentucky.

Ann half sobbed, "And look at this letter! Somehow, Tom Edson was in with him. It says something about shipping the bodies across the border. An-

other transport plane was needed—and they had to escape themselves! I—"

"Yes," I put in, suddenly understanding the whole set-up. "They put a bar of gold in the body of each flood victim. Then this undertaker could easily doctor up papers to fly the corpses to different localities. But they had to work fast. They needed our large transport in order to complete the job and escape themselves, before the government—"

"The government?" Ann asked curiously. "You mean it's something about those poor men in the cage?"

I nodded grimly. "Yes. Remember the mystery about the wreck of that gold-laden train in the Kentucky hills yesterday?"

Ann's eyes opened wide as understanding came to her.

The government had been transferring millions in gold bullion to its new underground vaults in the fastness of the Kentucky hills. Yesterday, that train had been mysteriously derailed along a stretch of lonely wilderness. Guards had been killed and mangled. The gold had been spread along the right-of-way for hundreds of yards. It had been hours before rescuers had reached the scene.

"And this undertaker saw a chance to get a million dollars worth of that gold," I explained, motioning to the door which I had locked upon the other robed figures. "Those other men are ignorant, backwoods creatures whom he talked into helping him. You recall the animosity of the illiterate mountain people toward this new gold vault. That main-line railroad is only a mile away from this place."

"You mean the bodies of the flood victims were to be used to smuggle the gold bars out of the country?" Ann prompted in awe.

"That's right. And your beloved body, Ann, would have been one of them—after Edson had ravished you! Edson, these letters indicate, was ready to skip out of the country, as soon as his gruesome gold-containers were across the border." I gripped Ann's warm shoulder as she swayed, ill at the horrible idea Tom Edson had conceived.

I said: "Those prisoners in there are safe until I can send government men to pick them up. But those poor devils—those guards in the cage—"

"Wait!" Ann exclaimed, pulling me toward the secret room. She picked up a hypodermic syringe and a small bottle of fluid from a desktop. "I recognized the name on this bottle," she said. "It's a powerful drug which attacks the brain cells. It has weakened their power of reasoning—made them like children. But they are strong men. I think—in time—they will return to normal."

"Then," I added with relief, "we'll have to leave them there until I can get help." My hand clasped Ann's and I started toward the doorway through which I'd entered this underground room. "Come!"

WE ARRIVED back at the shack on the edge of the field. I half dragged Ann through the small building before she saw the stark body of Pilot Larry Hendricks. We emerged into a moon-bathed night and I saw our cabin plane gleaming brightly far down the field.

And the bright light of the now clear night revealed something else. Just beyond the shack was a hillside rising abruptly from the edge of the field. From out of the undergrowth there protruded the fuselage of a transport plane. I ran toward it, stared at the numbers on the plane's fin and then hurried back to Ann's side.

"Larry Hendrick's plane," I explained. "It was wrecked when he pancaked it here at the edge of the woods."

Ann had suddenly let herself go lax and she sobbed: "Poor Larry. . . . Get me away from here, dear. Hurry!"

We checked over our plane, found it

unmolested. I turned over the prop while Ann cooperated from the cockpit. A moment later the powerful motor sputtered, roared into life. I climbed into the pilot's seat beside Ann and soon we were taxiing down the rough field.

Moments later we were skimming the treetops, climbing into the star-studded heavens. Far off, I saw the overflowed banks of the great Ohio stretching out beneath us like ribbons of quicksilver.

Ann snuggled against my side. She asked: "Jim, how in the world did we ever get on that radio beam leading us into that place of evil?"

I patted her hand, pulled her closer against my side. "Edson was formerly a radio engineer. He set up that outfit, operated the transmitter. It trapped Larry yesterday. Apparently, Larry was only slightly injured in the crash. . . . Edson needed another plane—and he craved you! He forced Larry to talk for a recording of those fake radio-beam signals. They played those signals on a record tonight, and we thought it was Larry sending us directions. We were riding a beam to—death!"

Ann shuddered, gripped me tightly, asking: "Then you—you found Larry?"

I nodded, thinking of that crumpled corpse of the young pilot back there in the shack.

Ann stared silently out through the windshield. Finally, she murmured; "The night is so beautiful, Jim. Let's fly on forever, far away from memories of tonight. I want to try to—to forget."

And as I picked up our bearings along the river, I only wished that I could fly on forever with lovely Ann. But I knew that before we could be alone, I must yet return here and help remove what had been a menace to a nation—and another person who had been a menace to the girl I love.

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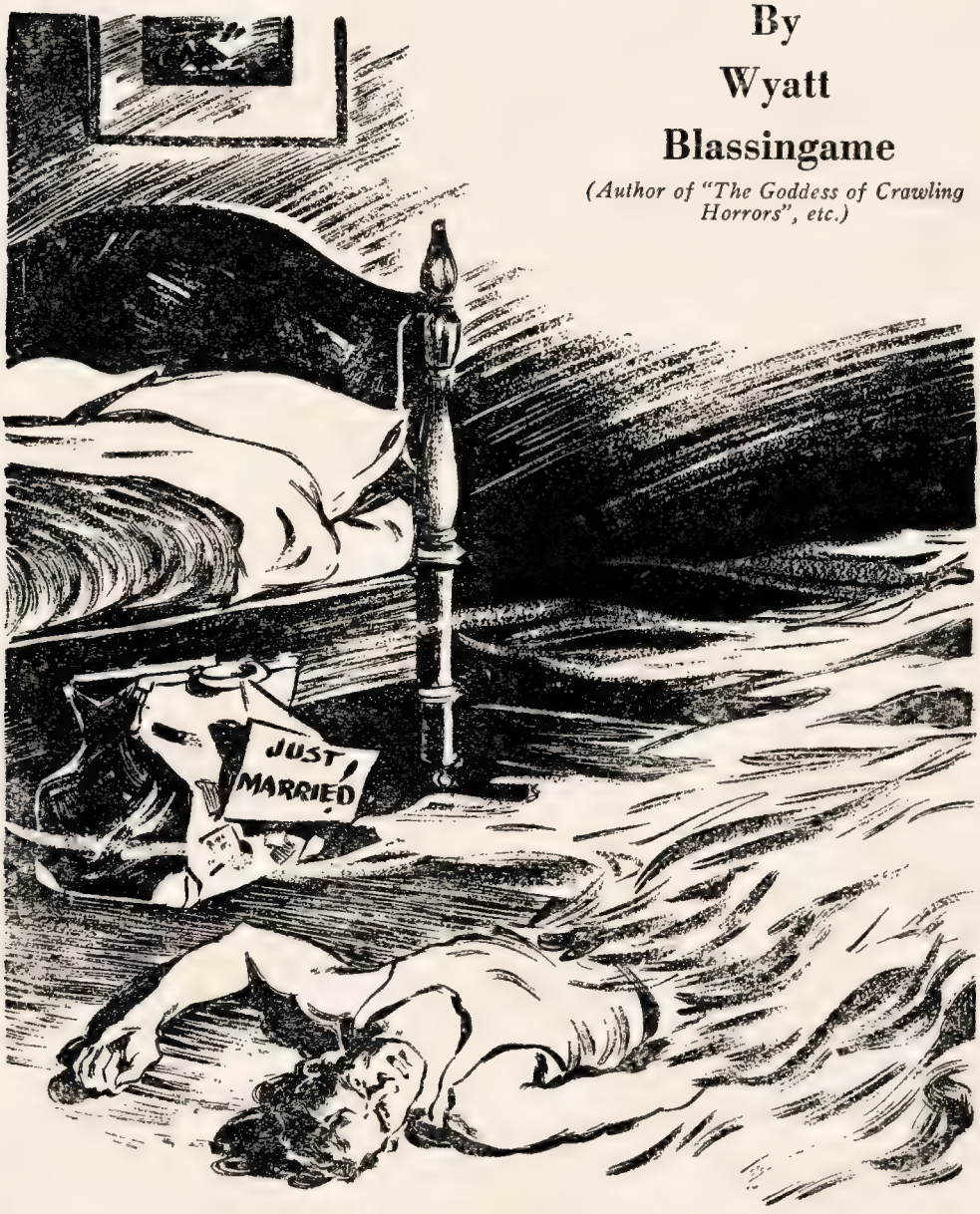

Can I go on living knowing that in my greed I have hurled a hundred souls to fiery death. . . ? Can I marry the girl I snatched from the threshold of happiness by making her a widow on her bridal night? Can I defy the eerie, tormenting whispers that constantly remind me that my ghastly fate is sealed. . . ? I intend to try!

MADE IN HELL

A Novelette of An Inescapable, Whispering Doom!

CHAPTER ONE

Voice of the Waves

I MUST have been running hard when I awoke, for the actual awakening shocked my muscles, jarred me like a blow across the shins so that I stumbled and fell. Then I was on hands and knees in the wet sand, the rain beating upon me. The heavy surge of the bay was so close that little eddying waves washed the sand under my fingers. Salt spray mingled with the rain. I crouched there for what may have been full minutes, my mind filled with the fire-painted fragments of its dream—and with the sound of the curse. I was afraid.

The picture of red and yellow flame came back to me, and the sound a voice screaming words that I should remember and could not to save my life . . . .

I had gone to sleep in my house just south of the Anna Maria fishing pier.

The storm was blowing then; not a hurricane at all but a good wind that would make the gulf and the bay dangerous for small craft. That had been around eleven o'clock. How long I had slept I had no idea. I came violently awake there on the beach.

Somewhere a man shouted, his voice thin in the wind, whipped away into nothing. Still on hands and knees I raised my head. I was facing the point of the island where bay and gulf met. And out beyond the point, a mile or so, flame made a red curtain against the sky.

I did not move. I did not hear the wind or the sea. I was staring at that fire, saying, "I had my eyes open even while I was asleep. That's why I think I've seen it before. I had my eyes open. I couldn't have run this far from the house otherwise. It's not the dream. It's not . . ." But I was thinking of the words I should remember and couldn't, remembering only the sound of them, the agony of the voice that uttered them—a voice buried in hatred.

I got to my feet and started running again. The beach was narrow here, all of it awash. I had to turn slightly inland and push my way through sagegrass and palmetto. The exercise cleared my brain. I forgot the dream in the sudden shock of reality.

The *Havana* had sailed at midnight!

My mouth was dry and my heart hurt. I reeled, feeling as though I had been kicked below the belt. The fire two miles out on the water seemed to leap and roar straight down upon me. I thought I heard women screaming in pain, the shrieks of burned children.

I owned the small line of three boats running between Cuba and various gulf ports. This morning the insurance inspector at Tampa had told me the *Havana* should not sail before changes were made in her boilers and fireproofing equipment. I stood to lose thousands of dollars if she were tied up. The inspector had hinted at a bribe. I had paid—and at midnight the *Havana* sailed! Now. . . .

A half dozen persons had already gathered on the point when I reached it. They stood bunched together, shoulders pushed into the wind. Against the wet sand and the night I didn't see them until I was within a yard or so.

One of them said, "Here's Montgomery now."

One put his hand upon my shoulder. I saw him though I didn't feel it. He said, "I'm sorry, old man."

"Is it—" They could not possibly have heard the croak of my voice above the wind and water. "Is it— the *Havana?*"

One said, "Yes. I got their call on the radio."

Close behind me, as thin and wild as the whine of wind through Australian pines, a voice screamed," . . . those who murdered me. . ."—and then it was gone, still screaming down the wind.

I TURNED, the sand churning under my feet. There was nobody there. A palmetto bent under the gale, sand hillocks dark against a darker sky.

One of the men caught me by the arm. "What's the trouble?" he asked. "What happened?"

"Did you hear?"

They looked at one another. "Hear what?"

"I thought it was somebody," I said. "It must have been the wind." But I knew. I had heard the voice and words before. They were part of those I had tried to remember, part of the curse which had been screaming through my brain when I awoke.

". . . *those who murdered me. . .*"

I stood looking out at the torn pennants of flame above the water two miles away. There had been one hundred passengers on that boat, a crew of forty. If they died, *I* had murdered them. To save

a few thousand dollars I had sent a ship to sea, knowing that is was not safe. There were women, babies, young men and girls whose lives lay ahead of them. And I had murdered. . . .

I tried to tell myself that I could not be guilty, that I had never imagined this could really happen. The inspector had so obviously left himself open for a bribe I believed he'd half made up the danger. Hundreds of ships had sailed with no better boilers of fire fighting equipment than the *Havana* and had reached port safely. I hadn't really believed it possible that. . . . Every human being tries to condone his own actions, to put them in the best light. I tried to excuse myself, and knew all the while there was no excuse. I was a murderer, a wholesale murderer of innocent persons.

I was ready then to repay with my life. I didn't know then how easy a retribution death would have been.

One of the men shouted, "Look! There's a boat! Headed this way!"

We could catch the light as it bobbed high on a wave, then ducked out of sight again. It was on the bay side of the point, but moving toward the gulf as fast as it moved toward the shore. "They are having a hell of a time with the current," a man said. "It sets through here about eight knots in normal weather. God knows what it is now."

The boat fought its way closer, drifting all the time until it was almost directly off the end of the point. As the light bobbed clear we could see for an instant a man's white, straining face, the blur of a woman's hair behind him. The other persons in the boat were shadows, vanishing as the boat tore down the slope of a wave.

"They're going to make it," someone shouted.

"They're drifting out too far. The current's got them."

"But they'll make it farther down."

"If they don't capsize. The bay's calm compared to the gulf, and—"

Merciful God! It was half prayer, half exclamation. "Look, look!"

None of us had seen the wave. We just saw the boat start up, *up,* until it seemed to have left the water altogeher. Then it went down. We waited for what seemed hours. We did not hear the wind or the waves. And then, thin, frantic, cutting sharp into silence came the cry; a woman's scream for help. That single word was all.

I was running, shouting crazily, racing for the water.

A man yelled, "Come back—you damn fool!" Someone grabbed at me and I knocked him away. The upflow of a wave ran cold over my bare feet, splashed on already wet pajamas.

"You can't reach them!"

"You fool! Come back!"

"You'll drown!"

The wave piled monstrous and black, whitecrested above me. I dived into it. My chest scraped sand and I had the impression of being pushed landward. Then the backwash got me and I was swimming.

I CAN'T explain how I found the girl. I don't think I had any real sense of direction. But one moment I was swimming, blind, tossed by big waves. And the next moment I heard her cry and I touched her.

I got her by the shoulders with both hands. A breaker hit us and we went under. Still holding her I kicked back to the surface. "Can you swim?" I yelled.

She didn't answer. Her head flopped to one side. Another wave struck us.

On the surface again I circled her with my left arm, keeping her on her back, her face above water. I tried to swim with my right arm and legs, to catch a comber and ride in on the crest. It was hopeless. The current was a hungry mouth sucking

us toward the gulf. I caught a glimpse of a waving flashlight on shore. It was farther than I'd thought.

The girl was like a stone tied to me. My muscles ached and I was choking. Minutes passed before I saw the waving flashlight again. It was barely visible. I knew then I couldn't make it.

"I might as well give up," I said, quite calmly. "I'm going to drown, and I'm tired. It's easy to do it now." I let the lead muscles in my arms and legs sink down.

The voice came from the fierce, sucking water. It was a voice thick with agony and hate. "Not now!" it said. "Not the easy death of water. You shall die as I die—*in fire!*" Then a wave surged and lifted me and I heard the eternal rumble of the hungry water.

My arms and legs moved wearily, somehow keeping my head and the girl's above the surface.

"It was only the water I heard," I said aloud. "A man dying thinks weird things. It was only the water." But once more I was trying to swim, struggling, keeping afloat with a strange kind of second-strength that I could not understand.

I did not see the boat. I felt the girl become light, rise out of my grip. Then something had me by the hair and was pulling me upward.

I lay in the boat half unconscious. Now and then I would begin to choke on hot salt water that came up from my belly and I would spit it out. "I must have swallowed half the gulf," I thought facetiously and laughed. It had a crazy sound.

We made shore more than a mile south of the point, at a place where Anna Maria cuts out into the gulf a bit. By that time I was able to move around and I helped get the women and old men out of the boat. There was a mother with a three-months old baby.

James Walters, the newspaper pundit, has a winter home not fifty yards from where we landed. It was closed for the summer, but we broke into it. We started fires and wrapped the women in blankets. A big tattooed sailor crouched before an open fireplace holding the bundled baby in his arms and rocking it.

I was building a fire when one of the men who had been in the boat came up to me. "Let me congratulate you on the lustliest pair of lungs this side of hell," he said. "We didn't know the other boat had overturned, didn't have an idea somebody might be in the water way out there. And then we heard you yelling."

I was striking a match, one of those found in the house. I held it without touching it to the fire. "Heard me yelling?" I said.

"We barely could," he said, "and yet everybody in the boat heard you clearly. And you must have been a quarter of a quarter of a mile away, in the water. I don't know how you could see us, no less holler that far."

"See you?" My mouth was suddenly dry. "I didn't see you."

"You must have," he said. "You told us just which way to turn. The funny part of it, we could hear you just as clearly a quarter of a mile away as we could when we got close. You musta been tiring, I guess."

"But I didn't yell," I said. "I didn't yell at all."

"Maybe you don't call it yelling," he said. "But to me a quarter of a mile over the noise of that storm is yelling in any man's country." He walked off, chuckling.

I crouched there in front of the fire. The match burned my fingers and I dropped it. Once more I was remembering that tortured and hate-filled voice: . . . those who murdered me . . . not the easy death of *water*. You shall die as I die—in fire!

CHAPTER TWO

Girl from the Storm

I HAD found an old trench coat in one of the closets and was wearing it over my pajamas when a man, evidently the doctor who had been called, came up to me. "Are you the gentleman who swam out to rescue a woman in the gulf?" he asked.

"I swam out and tried to rescue one," I said. "A lifeboat saved us."

"She wants to see you," he said, and led the way into a room where two women rested in twin beds, and where several more sat bundled before an open fire. "Here," the doctor said, gesturing toward the nearest bed. "She had a mighty close call, but she'll be all right soon."

Sometimes a man looks at a woman and doesn't see her as a pretty or ugly or normal human being at all. The reaction is electric, as though her very nearness shocks him, sets free some chemical that storms through his blood, taking complete possession of him. So it was when I looked at this girl. I think I shivered as though I had been struck.

Probably another person wouldn't have thought her pretty at that moment. A hot towel had been wrapped about her head and from under it curled a few spirals of damp, tawny-gold hair. Her face was bloodless, as white as the pillow on which she rested. Her eyes were level and blue, but salt water had put red streaks in the whites. Her lips were pale, but full; they were slightly parted above even, white teeth.

"Are you the man who saved me?"

"I swam out for you," I said. "But I didn't save you."

"No? Who did?"

"The boat saved both of us," I said. But I knew it wasn't the boat, not primarily. I had been ready to drown when the voice had sounded and made me struggle again. And it wasn't I who had called the boat to us. I tried to tell myself that I must have shouted without knowing it. That *had* to be the answer, of course. Anyway, my life had been saved with the girl's and I should be glad. Instead, I was afraid.

"You're being modest," she said. "You did save me, and I want to thank you." Her hand rose weakly from the cover.

I took it in both of mine. It was difficult to breathe, looking down at this girl. I think my fingers were so tight on hers they hurt, but she didn't flinch. "I'm glad you were saved," I said. "Very glad."

She smiled and I had the impression that somewhere I had seen her before, though I knew that was impossible. If ever I had met her I wouldn't have forgotten.

The doctor touched me, said, "You'd best leave the lady now. She's still very weak."

"Yes, sir." Then to the girl I said, "Hurry and get well." I put her hand back on the bed covers, turned and went out.

The third mate of the *Havana* had been in charge of the life boat which rescued me. I looked him up and asked if he knew who the girl was. "She's Miss Ann Ashley," he said. "Rather she's Mrs. Preciado. You must have read about her in the papers lately."

I remembered then. I hadn't seen the girl before but I had seen her picture and I had read news stories about her. She had come to Tampa with her family for the winter and had met Felipe Preciado, an Argentine adventurer. Whether she fell honestly in love with him or had been swept off her feet by his courting, had been the subject of much columnist's chatter.

The whole love affair had been as public as a picture show, due chiefly to the fact that Preciado had no dislike for publicity and the Ashley family's violent ob-

jections had made Ann rebel against them. They had placed dozens of obstacles in the way of the marriage; perhaps before it was over the girl would have eloped with the Argentine; but Preciado would not have it that way. No one ever doubted that he was honestly, desperately, furiously in love with Ann Ashley. He had met and overcome her family's objections with the ardor of a knight of the Round Table killing dragons for his lady. And early tonight they had been married. They had sailed for their honeymoon on the *Havana.*

"IT was a hell of a honeymoon," the mate said. "They stayed in the saloon drinking 'till the ship got out in the channel. Then I saw 'em heading for their cabin. And it wasn't five minutes later the ship went up in fire. They'd just about had time to undress, and nothing else."

"What happened to Preciado?"

The mate said, "He burned," and the man's leather-tan face turned grey as he spoke.

"I'd just pushed my boat free," he said. "There was a hell of a noise with everybody screaming, and the storm and all. The whole forward end of the ship was on fire, except for the fo'c's'le head. The forward well deck looked like the seventh furnace in hell. And right out of the fire that Preciado guy began to scream. It wasn't like nothing I ever heard before. With all the other people yelling and the storm and the fire you could hear him like a foghorn in a calm; yet it wasn't very loud. It was just the—the *way* he was screaming."

"How?" I asked. "How?" My mouth was open but the words clogged in my throat.

"I don't know exactly," the mate said. "It was like, well, like having to give up his wife right then hurt him more than the fire. And like he didn't mind burning, didn't mind the pain if he could just get to finish cursing whoever was responsible. The fire was all around him. Once the wind whipped it and I saw him. Looked to me like he was burning like a torch. But he stood there, yelling out that curse, saying—"

Those who murdered me shall be murdered as I have been, at the moment they most want to live. Their marriages shall be consummated in hell. They shall die as I die. Not the easy death of water over their heads. Not the crash of a bullet and the swift relief of death. They shall die as I die — in fire!

I thought the words had formed there in the space between us the way an airplane leaves smoke words in the sky. Then I saw the mate staring at me, his mouth open, his eyes bulging. And I knew that I had spoken.

"Good God!" he said. "How — how did you know? You weren't . . ."

I stared back at him. I don't think either of us moved for a long while, though perhaps he did. I have no real memory of even seeing him. Finally I turned and went stumbling out of the house.

The dawn was grey and lead colored. The wind came only in gusts, rattling the cabbage palms. Clouds scudded in tatters low overhead. Rain would spit down on a burst of wind, and stop. I remembered that I walked home, the full three miles or more, barefooted, wearing the old trenchcoat over my pajamas.

"There'll be an investigation," I said aloud. "They'll find out about that bribe. I've to worry about that." But it seemed unimportant. I couldn't even think about it.

"Persons died out there," I said. "Many of them. I'm their murderer." There's no way to tell just how I felt about that, the dead sickness in my stomach and around my heart. And yet I don't think about those persons long, not all of them. I thought only of the man

robbed of his wife on his wedding night, of that man wrapped in flame, the flesh of his body crackling and turning black, and of his voice raised in a chant of hate and agony, cursing those who had killed him.

"There's nothing to that curse," I told myself. "The thought of giving that bribe was weighing on my subconscious mind and I dreamed the ship was burning, the passengers blaming me for their deaths. That's a normal dream. And as for the words — maybe I didn't have them exact. Anyway, it's the natural thing for him to have said. Coincidence . . ." But deep inside my body I was cold, and it was not the bleak morning that chilled me.

I had come to Anna Maria for some fishing; the kingfish were running. But I didn't go out that day and I didn't go back to Tampa as I should have done. I knew that the company would want me there. In fact Pete Vincent, who runs the local pavilion, brought over a telegram asking for me. But I didn't go.

With the passage of a few hours I had ceased to worry about the curse, explaining that quite logically to myself. But more and more I came to realize what the discovery of my bribe would mean. The insurance company might prosecute. Certainly there would be suits by passengers. My fortune would be wiped out. And jail . . . . The whole prospect terrified me.

I walked to the pavillion and telephoned my lawyers to come down from Tampa. "I won't go back there," I told myself, "until I have some plan of action worked out." I tried to convince myself that I wasn't actually responsible. "It was Davis, the inspector who took the bribe," I said. "And ships have sailed before, safely." So I tried to hide from the fear and remorse inside me.

It was shortly before noon when Davis arrived. I had just gone in the kitchen to make a sandwich and he came in the back way without knocking. He was a handsome, youngish man but now his face was drawn with terror. His eyes looked sunken and wild. "You've got to help me," he said desperately. "You've got to help me!"

"Help? How?" I didn't want him in my house. I wanted to forget I had ever seen him. But I knew that we shared the guilt equally. I had to admit that to myself, even though I didn't want to.

"You've got to give me money enough to get away," he said. "They'll send me to jail. I can't go to jail! I can't!"

I didn't answer until I had got some bacon out of the icebox, turned on the pilot light of the gasoline stove. There was a faint dripping somewhere, but I thought it was water still draining from the roof.

With the stove going I said, "We can't run away from it. We'll have to face it."

He grabbed me by the arm and jerked me around. "I'm not going to!" he yelled. "You've got money. You'll go free. They'll send me to jail. And I can't . . . ." He was panting, desperate. He crossed the room, then came back cringing like a beaten animal.

"I took that bribe because I needed the money," he said. "I really thought the ship would be safe. And — well, I was to be married today. I needed the money. And after the ship burned . . . . I couldn't tell the girl. I married her not two hours ago. You've got to give me money enough to take her away with me."

I gave him a check for five thousand dollars. Perhaps I did it because the idea occurred to me that if he ran away, the investigators would be inclined to put more blame on him and less on me. It's human for a person who's afraid and desperate to clutch at what seems the best way out. So I gave him the check and told myself it was because I wanted him to get free.

He thanked me, almost crying. Then he started for the door, but stopped and came back into the kitchen. He didn't say anything for a moment and in the quiet I could hear the slow *drip-drip* that I thought was water.

"Listen," he said. "Was there — I mean, did you . . . dream . . .?"

Intense cold seemed to clutch my feet, to rise upward slowly making my whole body rigid. "What do you mean?"

"Did anybody — did you hear anybody on that ship — somebody who cursed — his murderers?"

"Who told you about it?"

"So it's true." The words formed silently on his lips. Across the room we stared at one another and there was no sound except that slow *drip-drip* of liquid.

"No one told me," he said at last. "I read about the fire in the paper and it didn't mention — this other. But I knew of the fire already. I dreamed . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

As *I* Die—In Fire

"I HAD a dream too," I said finally. "But of course that's a lot of tommy-rot. We were both subconsciously worried by what we had done."

I could see the strain in his face, see the man trying to force himself to believe what I said. "That must be it," he answered. But his hands shook as he took a cigaret and a match from his pocket. "That must be it," he said again and struck the match. The blazing head broke off and fell, still burning, to the floor.

There was just time for me to see that it landed in a puddle of liquid and that one edge of that puddle extended to the gasoline stove.

Then the whole room crashed into bursting flame.

The explosion lifted me, slammed me against a wall. I sprawled and when I tried to get up again my knees wouldn't hold me. I tried to see, but my eyes were blinded by that first flare, a white glazed fury stamped on their retina that shut out all other vision. I tried to crawl. Fire ran hot over my hand and I screamed.

Madness struck me. I flung my arms out, shrieking. I jumped up, hit the wall and fell again. I dived back at the wall as though I would batter my way through it. Insane terror had blinded me as completely as the explosion. I shrieked, whirled in mad circles, falling, jumping up, striking wildly like a caged cat whose fur had been set afire.

And then—I swear it—a hand touched my hand. The crescendoing roar of flame was a voice that said: "Not now. Now would be too easy. *When you most want to live . . .*" And all the while the hand on mine was guiding me.

Then there wasn't any voice anymore, no hand pulling me along. But somehow I had found a door and was through it, stumbling across the yard, across the road, falling into a water-filled ditch where the wetness felt good against my burned hands and face.

I looked up after a moment and was able to see again. Across the road the whole cottage was buried in red flame and smoke. Even at this distance the heat was like a lance flung against my face. The roar of the flames was thunderous. And from the middle of them came the sound of a man screaming. The cries were unbearable, hellish. They were two octaves higher than a man's voice should be. They seemed to rip the vocal chords, convulsive, terrible, unending.

They kept on and on. I began to scream at the sound of them. Davis couldn't still be alive! He couldn't suffer that long! And yet the cries didn't end.

A wall of the kitchen crashed. The flames leaped, cleared by the wind for an instant, and I saw Davis. He was in

what had been the center of the room. His clothes were gone. His eyes were gone. His body was no more than charred and stinking meat. And yet his mouth was open and he screamed. Then the flames covered him again.

It seemed hours before the voice became a faint mewling, and stopped.

And crouched in the ditch across the road I was thinking, "Davis was married only two hours ago. He came straight here after the wedding. He had loved the girl so much that he had taken a bribe to get money for her; he had, in actuality, murdered for her; he had ruined his life for her because of his love, because he wanted to be with her. And I was thinking, ". . . . *murdered at the moment they most want to live. Their marriages shall be consummated in hell!*

THERE IS little need to tell of the days and weeks that followed. The investigation dragged through. My defense said I had believed the ship to be safe. They pointed out that I had risked my own life to save one of the passengers. That act, and the proper distribution of money, kept me out of prison.

But the newspapers marked me, correctly, a murderer. They made my name a symbol of all the foulness and repulsiveness which wealth, criminally used, can become. Persons I had thought of as friends would not speak to me. Twice in one day, while the trial was still going on, persons spat at me on the sidewalks. I ducked my face and kept going. Even after the investigation was over I walked into a bar and was refused. One of the customers told the bartender, "Throw that b——— out of here. He burned alive over forty men and women and babies trying to save a few thousand dollars. Throw him out if you expect anybody else to stay and drink." Others joined with him. I said, "I'll go. I'll go," and went out quickly.

Damage suits consumed my fortune. When it was over I had only a trust fund which could not be touched and from which I got two hundred a month.

It will seem strange that I went back to Anna Marie to live; but the island is small and cloistered and I could be alone there. I could avoid insults. I could live cheaply.

It was the day before I returned to Anna Maria that the girl called on me. I was still living in the house which I had been forced to sell. It was a big place, but the servants were gone. There was no sound except the noises I made in moving about. Then the door bell clamored and I answered it.

I stood there staring at Ann Ashley, Mrs. Preciado. And I felt as I had that other time I saw her, the electrical shock of her nearness running through me. I didn't speak for a moment. I simply stared. She was more lovely than I believed possible for a human being to be. Her hair was soft red-gold, curling close to her head. The face was oval with wide eyes and a full, sensitive mouth.

I think I half reached out to touch her; and then I realized why she must have come here. I stood there, still holding the door, and said, "Yes?"

"May I come in?"

"There's no need," I said. "I'm packing to leave. You can tell me now what you think of murderers, of men that turn babies to save a few dollars. Say it and get it over with."

"But I don't want to say that. I've read about you in the papers; the things they say about you. I've heard what persons say to you on the street. I came to tell you that I partially understand, that I know you're no real murderer."

There was a sudden uplift to my heart. "I—I killed your husband," I said slowly.

"You saved my life," she said. "You risked your own, you almost died saving

me. A real killer couldn't have done that. I understand that you really believed the boat to be safe. Your sin was carelessness. You had never known any kind of danger, never even had to work and it didn't occur to you that such things could really happen. That was your fault."

She put her hand on mine for a moment. "Good luck," she said. She turned slowly and went away.

I didn't know until after she had gone how utterly alone I had been during the last few weeks. Perhaps if it had not been for her visit I would have committed suicide soon after going back to Anna Maria. And perhaps that was part of the plan, the destiny which I could not escape. The crash of a bullet through my skull, the swift taking off would have been a relief and an end to suffering. My fate was to be different . . . .

ANN had said that now, with my fortune gone, I would work. And through working, through struggle, I would gain in understanding and in manhood. But I didn't work. My trust fund furnished enough for me to live cheaply. I took a house on a bayou, far off from any neighbors, and lived there like a hermit. I slept, fished, or just sat in the sunlight for hours feeling sorry for myself.

And then one winter Ann came with her family to Anna Maria. She learned where I was living and visited me.

I stood in my weed-tangled yard and looked at her. It was only the third time I had ever seen her and yet it seemed that I had known her all my life, that the need and love for her had been accumulating year by year until it was a wild, unbearable hunger inside me.

"Well," she said, "you were going to work when you came down here. What have you done?"

"Nothing. I — I just haven't got around to it."

"You're going to now," she said and smiled at me. "I'm going to make you. What is it you had planned to do?"

"I'd thought about writing music," I said, and felt foolish. "You know — just popular music. I've had a hell of a lot of musical training; it was about the only thing my family could get me to do when I was a kid. And I've thought — "

"Quit thinking," she said, "and get busy. I'm going to see that you do."

It was because of her that I began to work. You may say that writing music isn't work; but if you do, you don't know what you're talking about. It's easier for a man to force his muscles to work than to force his mind. I was mentally lazy. It was actual pain to keep flinging myself back at a problem that I wanted to forget.

But because Ann kept after me I worked. I worked nine hours a day and did my own house keeping on top of that. I would have worked more except that after nine hours my mind was exhausted, drained empty. I would be able to think of nothing but Ann and my need for her.

I saw her frequently. I played my songs for her. She listened, as bad as they were, and encouraged me. It was inevitable that we fell in love. I say "we." I had loved her since that first time I saw her bundled in blankets and towels and whitefaced from her fight with the gulf.

The climax came one day when I had played the finished draft of a song for her. I was sitting before the piano. She leaned over the top of it looking down at me. Very quietly, without any warning, she said, "You love me, Allan. I've seen it in your eyes for weeks. Why don't you tell me? Why don't you ask me to marry you?"

She must have seen the fear in my face, seen the way my cheek muscles grew stiff and cold. I stood up and crossed to a window. It was a hot day, the sun beating down on my weed-choked lawn, on the wall of mangroves that cut me off from

the bayou. I looked out of the window for awhile before I said, "I'm afraid to marry you. I'm afraid." In that sunbright room the words sounded absurd.

When I explained to her why I was afraid it sounded more absurd than ever. "It was a mere coincidence that Davis dropped a match in gasoline the day he was married," she said. "And as for your dreams, you explained them. Worried about what you had done, it was the natural thing for both of you to dream. And the voices: you were worked up, frightened. You imagined you heard them, that's all."

I wanted to believe her. I *had* to believe, because of the terrible hunger for her that I could no longer resist. And standing there in the room where I had lived uneventfully for two years it should have been easy to believe. I told myself that it was all something I had imagined during those hectic days that were past. I forced myself to believe.

And yet, even as we made plans for the wedding, even as I kissed her I was afraid. I thought I heard in the whisper of the wind a voice saying:

At the moment you most want to live . . . you shall die as I died — in fire!

CHAPTER FOUR

The Marriage Consummated in Hell

ALL during that day of our marriage the sense of being followed was with me. Time after time I thought I heard a voice just over my shoulder and turned to find that it could have been nothing except the wind, or the creak of a chair or some natural sound. In the midst of the wedding ceremony that sense of being watched, of somebody or something crouched close behind me, became overpowering and I spun about, turning my back on the amazed clergyman. But there was no one there except the parents and friends of Ann to witness the ceremony.

After the ceremony we took the bus from Bradenton to Miami — that was to be our honeymoon — and even in the bus I could feel the thing behind me, watching, waiting . . . .

"What is it?" Ann asked. "What's troubling you?" Her hands gripped mine, tight, steady.

"Nothing. Nothing. I thought I heard — somebody. That's all."

"You *can't* be afraid," she said. "You *can't* make a phobia out of that absurd fear. You can't let it ruin your life — my life."

And I tried to forget my terror, tried to think only of the girl beside me and of my love for her.

That night, hours later, I sat alone in our hotel room; Ann was in the bath undressing. Through the closed door I could hear her moving about and the sound seemed to stop my heart, to make it beat with heavy, uncertain blows high in my chest. In a minute or two now that door would open and Ann would come into the room with me. I could vision her as she would be: the red-gold hair soft about face and shoulders, the white throat, the swell of her breasts half visible above the low cut of her night dress. She would come slowly toward me, and stop. Then I would be standing close to her, looking at her without touching her yet, postponing that last fierce desperate delight one more moment for the joy of waiting. And then my arms would be around her, holding her body tight against mine and—

I heard her knuckles rap on the bathroom door. "Allan," she called. "The lock has caught on this door somehow." She laughed nervously.

"Coming," I said. I stood up. There was no light in the room except a small lamp on the table near the bed. I stepped toward it, intending to grind out my cigaret in the ash tray beside the lamp. I took one step and the light went out.

Darkness struck furiously at the room.

I think my whole body turned icy in that moment. It was not the sudden darkness. It was the sense which came with it, that renewed sensation of *feeling* someone close to me. There was somebody else in that room! It was impossible, incredible, because five seconds before I had looked and known positively that I was alone.

"Allan," Ann called. "Allan, come open the door."

HER voice sounded small in the darkness. I didn't answer. I turned, staring into the gloom, reaching out with hands tensed to recoil, to lunge backward from what I might touch. The red tip of my cigaret was visible, nothing else.

"Allan," Ann called again. "What's the trouble?"

"Be there in a moment," I answered. I was telling myself that I must have tripped over the light cord and jerked it from the wall. I hadn't felt myself kick it, but could easily have done so without knowing it. I thought I still knew where the table was. I stepped toward it.

Something struck my right shin and I was falling. I lunged to keep my balance, slipped, and went down harder than ever. I heard more than felt the loud *crack* of my temple striking the table. Then I hit the floor, rolled half on my face, half on my right side and lay sprawled. I tried to get up and couldn't. There was no pain. It was simply one of those forms of temporary paralysis which sometimes follows a blow on the head.

Ann had evidently heard me fall. Her voice was high, tinged with hysteria. "Allan! What happened? Answer me!" But I couldn't answer her. I lay there motionless.

And then I saw my cigaret. It had fallen on the rug about seven feet away from me. It made a small red dot against the darkness and there was the faint odor of burning wool. "It'll go out in a moment," I thought. "It'll burn a hole in the rug, but that's all."

Directly behind me someone laughed.

I tried to turn, tried to scream. Every muscle in my body jarred as though electricity had ripped through me. It seemed that I had to move, that no earthly force could control the wild straining of my muscles. And yet I did not move. I lay there facing the small glow of the cigaret and behind me now was only silence — and some vague, evil presence. "It was the wind ruffling the window curtains that made the noise," I told myself. "It wasn't anybody. It couldn't be."

The red spot of fire was growing larger instead of going out. From the bath Ann banged on the door and shouted. The fire spot grew bigger.

Then all at once the color changed. A blue flame rippled upward. It ran down the rug like a twisting blue luminous snake. Newspapers I had dropped on the floor burst into flame. I heard the crackling of wood and knew that the dresser must have started to burn.

THE blue flame spread across the rug. The wooden floor began to burn. The room filled with smoke and I choked on it, began to cough. The heat of the fire hammered on my body, bringing out steaming sweat. I tried to shut my eyes against the flames that sent pain stabbing through eyeballs to my brain, but terror propped them open. I stared into the fire, watching it grow larger and move toward me. The perspiration that drenched my body was half from the fire, half from the cataclysmic struggle to move. And I was powerless to move an inch.

Somewhere in the flames a voice said in soft fury, "Now that you most want to live you shall die! You shall consummate your marriage — in hell!" It laughed and was gone. Perhaps it had never been more than the crackle of fire.

The blue line of fire moved swiftly at my feet. I was wearing pajamas and bedroom slippers. The fire touched my slippers, began to coil around them. Agony lashed through me. I tried to scream and the muscles of my leg convulsed, knotted themselves in insane struggles. But I did not move.

And all the while now Ann was screaming, throwing her small body against the bathroom door in a frantic, futile attempt to smash it. I knew she couldn't break that door. And I knew there was little chance of her being heard. The bath was toward the back of the bedroom so that two walls and several yards of open space separated her from the hall. The only hope was that the fire would be discovered before it burned through to her. For me, lying helpless in the midst of flame, there was no hope.

There was the odor of burning leather from my slippers, the stench of charred flesh. Along the rug the blue flame moved, flicked at my leg. The pajamas made a tiny white flame as they burned. Head half bent, I watched myself burning alive, and could not move, could not even scream, though my throat threatened to burst with the effort.

The room turned into a mass of fire. No human being could live long in that space. It seemed to me that I was moving now, thrashing about in unbearable and furious agony, screaming, shrieking endlessly, hurling all the wild torment out of my throat in cries inhuman.

And then, distinctly, I heard the lock of the bathroom door crack, heard the door slam open. Ann had come into the room with me!

"Get back!" I shrieked. "Don't touch me! Get back and close that door!" Outside men and women were shouting. There was a chance Ann could be saved if she stayed in the bath. "Get back!" I kept screaming endlessly. "Get back!"

I did not see her. I felt her hands on my arms, felt her dragging me across the floor. I could not move, could not struggle, could not even cry out any more.

She jarred against a wall. "Oh God!" she whispered. "Where's the door? I can't see!" She stumbled and went down on her knees.

Close behind her a voice said, "Come this way . . . . He was willing to give his life for you. You love him enough to offer yours in return. I won't come back any more. This way . . ." And somehow we were through the door into the open hall and persons were all around us.

THE hotel explained it all quite naturally. The guest before us had broken a five gallon bottle of grain alcohol in that room. It had soaked into the rug and when my cigaret fell on it the fire started. The bathroom door had warped slightly, making the lock stick. Ann had finally succeeded in battering it free.

She had kept a wet towel over her face as she pulled me from the room, so that only her hands had been burned slightly. My feet and legs suffered severely. It was necessary to graft skin on them, but I recovered and can move around now as well as ever.

I did not mention to the firemen or the hotel authorities the voice I'd heard in that room. They would have laughed at me. But once as I was recovering Ann said, "Did you hear — just after I bumped into the wall and lost my direction . . .?"

"Yes," I said.

We have never mentioned it since. We have been very happy. I hope that some day I will be able to accomplish something I can offer as a decent tribute to the man that I murdered without intending to, the man who, through his death, made a decent human being of me.

THE END

SATAN'S CHARM SCHOOL

By Henry Treat Sperry

(Author of "The Girl Who Painted Horror," etc.)

What mysterious, malignant force had changed the virginal, unsophisticated pupils of that select girls' finishing school into creatures of abandoned passions—the devotees of midnight, orgiastic rites?

I HAD been appointed to the chair of psychology at Mount Birnham only over the determined opposition of the older members of the board of directors. They insisted that I was too young to teach in a finishing school for young girls. When I came upon Ramona Thesselay dancing nude in a moon-bathed forest clearing, one night, I realized that there was justice in their objection.

Ramona Thesselay had a strange, fiery beauty which seemed out of place—somehow sinisterly foreign—in the virginal and unsophisticated atmosphere of Mount Birnham. I had noticed her in the classroom, where the other girls by comparison seemed colorless and without character. All but Helen Carrolton. Nothing could over-shadow the vibrant, blonde radiance of Helen's beauty. Not even Ramona Thesselay's.

I had found it difficult to maintain the aloof, objective attitude toward these two pupils which my position demanded. In spite of myself I could not keep thoughts of them out of my head. They fired my imagination with visions and dreams which had no place in the mind of a professor of psychology. For this reason I had schooled myself to a colder, more formal attitude toward them than I used in my contacts with the rest of the class. This was all the more difficult since, in their widely different manners, I observed that they subtley invited advances from me.

In fact, subtle is hardly the word to use in describing Ramona's attitude. On an increasing number of occasions I had detected an expression in her eyes, as she sat in the classroom, that was at once a flaunted challenge and a deliberately frank invitation. And in spite of myself I found my whole body tingling with the urgent desire to respond.

And that desire grew, became harder and harder to resist as the weeks passed. Correspondingly, Ramona's advances became more marked. I began to run across her frequently during my afternoon strolls around the campus. Nor did she take any pains to pretend that these encounters were merely fortuitous. One night she came to my quarters on the transparent pretext of asking for assistance in preparing for a quiz not due for a week. As she stood in the doorway, framed by the light behind her which revealed the fact that she was clad solely in gossamer-thin silk dress, I felt myself trembling with the all but irresistible impulse to sweep her into my arms and crush my lips against her alluring, provocatively smiling mouth.

I peremptorily ordered her back to her room in a voice that was hoarse and uncertain.

To avoid her, I began deferring my walks until after night had fallen. And thereby I hastened my undoing. . . .

The sight of Ramona Thesselay's white body swaying provocatively, as though to the strains of an invisible orchestra, would have fired the blood of a man far less susceptible than I. Against the backdrop of the somber trees her figure glowed as though with an internal flame—and as I came to a paralyzed halt at the edge of the clearing I felt my blood pound in my arteries with a command I no longer had the strength to resist. Under a spell I moved toward the girl—and the next instant her warm, nubile body was in my arms, and our lips were locked in a kiss that blotted everything from my consciousness but a burning lust that was pagan and utterly triumphant. . . .

FROM that encounter I date the strange and sinister change which began to be manifest in Mount Birnham. At first I

thought that this change existed only in my own, over-wrought mind.

But I began to hear about it from other teachers. They were all puzzled at the signs of nervous tension among their pupils.

Questioning the girls accomplished nothing. They all insisted that nothing was wrong—but they did so with a furtiveness in their manner which betrayed the truth: something *was* wrong—something which they dared not talk about.

Then, a second time, Ramona Thesselay came to my rooms at night.

She did not wait for me to dismiss her, this time, but forced herself into the room as soon as I had opened the door. She closed the door behind her and leaned against it, her bosom rising and falling rapidly as her eyes glared at me in unaccountable rage.

"Why—why, Ramona," I stammered, "what are you doing—?"

Again she was clad only in that almost diaphanous silk dress. Its sheer fabric was hardly more of a covering for her gorgeous body than a coat of dye would have been. Clearing perceptible beneath it were her full, pointed breasts, the palpitant curve of her abdomen, the smooth, erotic roundness of her tapered legs.

"You stay away from Helen Carrolton!" she fairly spat at me.

I was holding onto myself only with the last vestiges of my will. The sight of this girl's provocative, scarcely veiled body fanned into flames a lust which had become an obsession with me—and which must have been only too readable in my expression. Ramona's manner softened. The rage left her eyes, and was replaced with the secret, languorous smile which was usually in them when she looked at me. She came to me and pressed her body against my own, moving it in a manner that sent waves of living fire sweeping along my nerves as her arms twined themselves about my neck.

"But you can't care for that washed-out little frump," she whispered. "Not when you have me. . . ."

I could feel the last dam of my will crumbling beneath an irresistible tide of lust. For a moment I held the girl in a crushing, wildly passionate embrace. Then, I know not how, a resurgence of will came to my rescue. A feeling of disgust with myself for my betrayal of trust, my weak capitulation, swept over me and I released myself from Ramona's arms, thrust her backward toward the door.

"Get out," I muttered huskily. "Go back to your room. Quick—before someone sees you. . . ."

The rage came back into the girl's beautiful eyes. "Then you are in love with that baby-faced blonde!" she said in a low, venom-filled voice. "You think that she's everything that's pure and sweet and lovely, don't you? You won't defile your love for her by having anything more to do with me. . . . Well—" a scornful, bitter smile came to her full red lips—"Tonight go to that grove where we first met," she said. "Your sweetheart will be there. Go and see how sweet and undefiled she is. I may not be good, but I'd die rather than become a thing like Helen Carrolton!"

Holding her head high in scornful pride, Ramona opened the door and went out, slamming it behind her. I stood there gazing at it in dull bewilderment. What she had said made no sense to me—but I detected something underlying her words which sent a chill of pure horror racing along my spine. What had she meant by "a *thing* like Helen Carrolton" . . .?

AS on that first occasion, a moon was riding high in the heavens as I approached that little clearing in the forest where I had come upon Ramona Thesselay dancing naked. As I neared it the sound of young, chanting voices reached

my ears—and their dominant note was one of wild, abandoned terror.

The voices ceased before I could distinguish any words. I crept closer, and finally reached the edge of the clearing where a growth of underbrush shielded me from sight as I gazed out upon a scene of strange, fantastic beauty—and inexplicable menace. A dozen nude girls knelt in the moonlight about an altar. On top of the altar was the sculptured representation of a coiled serpent in marble.

And standing behind the altar was the only erect member of the group. She, as were the rest of the girls, was holding a silver beaker to her lips. It was not until she finished drinking whatever it was in the beaker, and lowered it from her lips in concert with the other participants in this strange rite, that I recognized her. Then I saw that it was Helen Carrolton!

Then she raised her arms high above her head, and as though this were a signal, the other girls rose and began to dance madly about her, giving voice to strange, unintelligible cries, and seemingly approaching some sort of an emotional crisis.

But suddenly one of their number broke away from the dancing group. I recognized her as Maria Davis, one of the lovliest and apparently most unsophisticated members of the class. Maria threw herself upon the ground and burst into wild sobs.

"I can't stand it any more!" she shrieked. "It isn't beautiful or classical—it's bad. That wine is terrible. It makes me have awful, shameful feelings. I won't drink any more of it, and I won't come to these meetings any more. I'm—I'm going to tell the dean about them. . . .!"

Then she raced off into the night, passing close to me but without seeing me. Quietly I followed her, leaving the girls still standing in their postures of stricken, dull amazement.

EARLY the next morning a cleaning woman came shrieking to the dean with a tale of incredible horror: Maria Davis's terribly mangled body had been found in the garden behind her dormitory.

A few hours later I was standing, shaken with an ague of horror, as I looked down at the body lying on its marble slab in the city morgue. It seemed incredible that anything human could have been responsible for this ripped and shredded mass of bloody flesh which only a day before had been the tender, exquisitely formed body of a young girl just flowering into lovely womanhood. It looked more like the work of needle-keen talons, of great razor-sharp claws wielded by a beast of overwhelming strength.

Yet the thing which I could not fight back out of my consciousness was the ghastly conviction that it *had* been the work of a human being—and that, moreover, I had good reason for believing that I knew who had committed this terrible crime, and the motive for doing it. . . .

I called at Helen's dormitory and I found that the house-mother was on the verge of hysteria. Like everyone else in the shcool she had been horribly shocked by Maria's ghastly death—but another element had entered into the matter, in her case: Helen had disappeared. She had not been seen since the night before. Of course, the old lady knew nothing of the orgies a number of her charges had participated in while they were all supposedly safe in their virginal beds. . . .

I went back to my rooms, sick with the conviction that Helen Carrolton was, indeed, a ruthless murderer—and a fugitive from the consequences of her act. . . .

The horrible death of Maria Davis cast a pall of gloom and terror over the entire school. A number of girls were immediately called home by their parents, and those who remained went about their activities with a haunting terror deep in

their eyes. Ramona Thesselay, alone, seemed unaffected, indifferent.

As for myself I was driven to the brink of madness with the mental struggle of trying to decide what to do. The only way the police had connected Helen's disappearance with Maria's death was to conclude that Maria's murderer had, for some as yet unexplained reason, abducted Helen. And somehow I could not yet tell what I knew. . . .

And now the fear was born in me that one of the girls would break down and inform the authorities of what had been taking place in the woods back of the school prior to Maria's death. Particularly I feared Ramona. I began to watch her narrowly, resolved that, if she should show signs of going to the dean, I would restrain her by physical force, if necessary.

So it was, that keeping vigil from my room, I saw her leave her dormitory just as it was getting dark, two days after the murder. To my relief I saw that she was heading, not in the direction of the administration buildings, but toward the woods in back of the school. I decided to follow her, nevertheless, and was only a few yards behind her when she entered the woods.

She was taking a different path from that which led to the clearing where those sinister rites had been celebrated, and we had not gone far when I realized where this one led. A mile or so back, was the deserted hut of a wood-cutter. This path led to it.

When I came upon the clearing where the hut stood, Ramona had already disappeared inside. Yellowish light washed the windows, witness to the presence of an oil lamp in the hut. I circled the place and crept up to one of the windows on the east side, cautionsly raised my head until I could peer inside.

I caught my breath in an audible gasp at what I saw. Stretched out on a cot near the wall was the pale-faced motionless figure of Helen Carrolton. A thrill of terror shot through my heart as I noted her lifeless appearance—the motionlessness of her breast, undisturbed by the least sign of respiration.

And the expression on Ramona Thesselay's face, as she stood above Helen's body and gazed down at it, typified all that is evil in this world. Her eyes were centuries old, steeped in the heartless viciousness of a thousand villianous lifetimes. And as I watched she leaned over and, cold callousness slapped Helen's unconscious face a stringing blow.

With a growl of animal rage rising in my throat I swung away, intent on bursting into that room and repaying Ramona for that senseless cruelty—but as I did so, from the tail of my eye, I caught the black, formless shape of something rising at my side, exactly as though it had sprung from the earth at my feet. I had a moment only of awareness. Then something crashed heavily against my skull, and consciousness went out like a doused light. . . .

I AWOKE to an awareness of voices and yellowish light. Painfully I opened my eyes. I was inside the hut, lying against the wall, bound hand-and-foot. Across the room from me, a huge, evil-faced thug stood with Ramona Thesselay at the side of the cot upon which rested the form of Helen Carrolton—and a thrill of joy shot through me as I noticed that her eyes were opened and that she was obviously alive in spite of her deathly pallor.

But that joy was quickly damped out by a flood-tide of helpless rage and terror as the man reached down and ripped the clothing away from Helen's white breasts. The girl lay there unresisting, gazing up into the man's leering face with dazed suffering and bewilderment in her eyes. Ramona stood by with that hateful, infernal smile of hers curving her red lips.

"She's okay," said the man. "Let's take a look at her legs."

With a quick gesture he ripped Helen's gown the rest of the way off her body, leaving the girl clad only in step-ins and brassiere, and sheer crepe hose on her perfect legs.

"Stop that, you devil!" I roared, and the fellow turned casually and looked at me. "Oh—so you've come out of it, have you?" he grunted. Then he turned back to his lewd inspection of the girl on the cot.

"This one ought to bring at least three grand," he said. "I'd like the job of initiating her, myself."

"No accounting for tastes," said Ramona, and she cast a look of malicious triumph in my direction. "Go ahead—if you want to. . . . But Bill, do me a favor, will you? Have her sent down with the first load for Buenos Aires."

The man she called Bill turned and looked at her with a chuckle. "What's the matter, don't you like this dame? Some gals have bumped themselves off to keep away from the B. A. houses. They're the toughest in the world. . . . But I'll see. Depends on where I get the best offer. . . ."

Cold horror gripped my heart as these words suddenly opened a whole vista of diablery in my mind. The pieces of the ghastly puzzle suddenly fitted together, and I knew what was behind the horrors which had blossomed like a poisonous growth at Mount Birnham during the past few weeks.

Without doubt this man was engaged in the South American white slave traffic—and Ramona Thesselay had entered the school to act as an under-cover agent for him. Their mode of operation was not immediately apparent—but I had no doubt that the orgies in the woods were somehow connected with them, as was the death of Maria Davis. And Helen

(Continued on page 124)

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Present Position.....
Address.....

(Continued from page 123)

Carrolton was to be their first victim—the first to be sent down that ghastly road which leads to blackest shame and unfathomable despair. . . .

The thought filled me with a rage that was like a holocaust in my blood. I surged against the cords that held my bound hands with a fury that scraped the skin from my wrists in sheets. I could feel the blood soaking my hands which became slippery with it—so slippery that in a few moments I felt the ropes sliding off. With difficulty I restrained myself from giving a shout of joy, and with a quick glance at the oblivious backs of the pair by the bed, I bent down and released my ankles. . . .

THE rest followed quickly. A man twice the size of this fellow would have fallen beneath the power given me by my consuming wrath, and the first time I got in a blow to his chin, he went down like a pole-axed steer. Then I caught Ramona as she was making a dash for the door, and lashed her, screaming and kicking like a fury, to the senseless body of her partner in crime.

Supporting Helen, I left them there, and retraced my steps to the campus. On the way, in halting syllables, for she was still weak and sick, Helen explained what she knew of the satanic plot. It developed that Ramona had organized a secret choral society, based on the old Greek rites in honor of Orpheus and Calliope. The girls had been fascinated with the idea, charmed with its classic beauty. And the plan to make it a secret society, open only to the elect had, of course, only added to its glamour.

But under the direction and management of Ramona, the performance of the rites had quickly taken on a sinister aspect. The girls, without knowing it, were being systematically drugged.

Thus Ramona cleverly gained an insuperable power over every member of

(Continued on page 126)

Chamber of Horrors

THE MOON faded, then black clouds scudded by its wan face and the sickly light it cast through the jagged branches spun a weird pattern across the ground in the old orchard where Sven Jungsen was digging. Slowly and methodically the big Swede sunk the spade, plunked the damp dirt beside the hole. The softness of the soil told him that this sod had been turned not long before. Old Mammy Juba must be right. . . .

It was a gruesome task—and eerie, but Sven wasn't afraid because the mumbo-jumbo of words that the old Negress had muttered when she gave him the shovel would protect him. Sven was not very intelligent.

But he had suspected foul play when three months had elapsed without his hearing from his brother. So he had answered the same matrimonial advertisement his brother had clipped—the one which stated that a farm-owning widow wanted a husband who would bring a thousand dollars as evidence of good faith—and he had come to Careyville. He had met the Widow Kraft, posing as a prospective husband and he had moved into a local hotel. When he could find no sign of his brother, and learned that Mrs. Kraft was still in the market for a mate, he knew his suspicions were well-founded. Then, old Mammy Juba had accosted him, told him she knew what he sought, and that she would help him.

Was that a root the spade had struck? Sven bent down, scooped the loose loam away with his hand—and seized a severed human arm! Horrified, he examined the rotting member, tossed it aside and dug furiously. Time and again he upearthed fragments of human bodies, always male; and at last he uncovered a foot from which three toes had long been missing. It was his brother Carl's.

Sven's homely face set in grim determination as he strode silently toward the dark, tomblike farmhouse, as he stole up the stairs toward the room where Mammy Juba had told him the Widow Kraft slept. Now he crouched over a dim form on a bed lit by pallid moonlight. His hand went for his case-knife. Hell—it wasn't there . . . must have lost it. Well, he'd kill her with his bare hands.

His strong fingers gripped the neck of the Widow Kraft. But there was no satisfaction—no struggle. He released his hold as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, for there was a large stain on the widow's left breast—and the handle of his own knife protruded. Anger at being cheated flooded Sven's body, but it was short lived. There was a heinous, cackling laugh. He turned to face Mammy Juba—too late, for something crashed down on his skull.

It was pure luck that the sheriff had been ordered to investigate activities in the Kraft house that very night. He saved Sven's life and he caught Mammy Juba. . . . The old Negress confessed knowledge of fifteen murders done by the Widow Kraft. Mammy Juba had stolen Sven's knife, killed Mrs. Kraft and laid a trap for Sven. She knew of the hiding place of the widow's fortune in blood-stained gold. Her plan nearly succeeded.

Mammy Juba burned—not like a witch of old—but in the electric chair.

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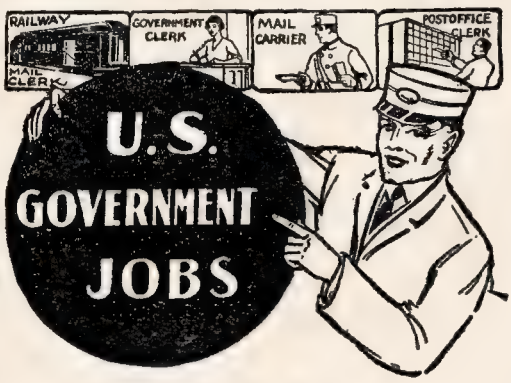

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(Continued from page 124)

the cult—and she saw to it that almost the entire school was gradually included, groups of them celebrating the rites on alternate nights, different girls taking turns officiating as the priestess. Cleverly, too, she gradually withdrew from the ceremonies, appearing only to supply the celebrants with drugged wine, preparing them against the day when she could induce them, stupified with drugs, to obey her in every particular. Then she would calmly turn them over to her confederate, who would sell their bodies to the vicious white slave traffic in South America. Maria, proving recalcitrant and unexpectedly resistant to the drug—as some rare individuals are—had to be done away with. Later we learned that the man, Bill, had done the deed, tearing the girl's body to shreds with a pruning hook for the mere bestial love of committing mayhem and butchery.

The police were not long in sweating the facts from Ramona and Bill. The latter gave enough information to lead to the conviction of some of the most vicious racketeers in the East. The girls were all put in the hands of physicians and, since their indulgence in drugs had not been very prolonged. they were all cured in short order.

Helen married me as soon as she emerged from the hospital, and I am still on the faculty of Mount Birnham, insulated forevermore against the sometimes pronounced charms of my students. . . .

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28x5.25-18	2.90	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
5.50-17	3.35	1.15
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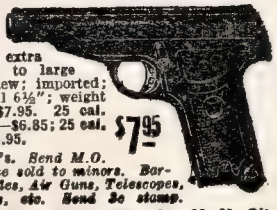

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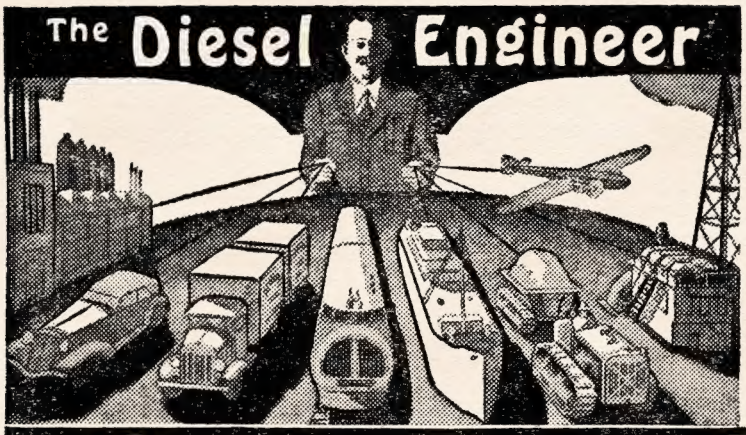

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440 W. Huron St., Dept. 872, Chicago, Illinois

High School Course at Home

Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work — prepares you for entrance to college. Standard H. S. texts supplied — Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and is vitally. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dpt. HC-49 Drexel at 58th, Chicago

HAVE A NEW SKIN!

Read this Free Offer!

IN 3 DAYS

Visible Pimples and Blackheads, Freckles, Ugly Large Pores and Surface Wrinkles Disappear!

It is all explained in a new free treatise called "BEAUTIFUL NEW SKIN IN 3 DAYS" which is being mailed absolutely free to readers of this magazine. So worry no more over your humiliating skin and complexion or signs of aging if your outer skin looks soiled and worn. Write to MARVO BEAUTY LABORATORIES, Dept. 604-N, No. 1700 Broadway, New York, N. Y., and you will receive this new treatise by return mail in plain wrapper, postpaid and absolutely free. If pleased tell friends.

STOP Scratching

***RELIEVE* Itching *of* Insect Bites**

Even the most stubborn itching of insect bites, athlete's foot, hives, scales, eczema, and other externally caused skin afflictions quickly yields to cooling, antiseptic, liquid **D. D. D. PRESCRIPTION.** Greaseless and stainless. Soothes the irritation and quickly stops the most intense itching. A 35c trial bottle, at drug stores, proves it —or your money back. Ask for **D. D. D. PRESCRIPTION.**

RAISE GIANT FROGS

FREE BOOK

GOOD MARKET!

Frog legs in big demand at good prices the year round! Easy to ship! **WE BUY!** Sell to us in addition to other waiting markets! Men & Women see what others are doing. Small pond starts you. Free book explains unusual offer to beginners.

AMERICAN FROG CANNING CO.
(Dept. 185-R) New Orleans, La.

HAY FEVER or ASTHMA

TREATMENT on TRIAL. If satisfied, send $1; if not, it's FREE. Write for it today. State which.

W. K. STERLINE, 610 Ohio Ave., SIDNEY, OHIO

Classified Advertising

Photo Finishing

20 Reprints 25c. Film developed, two prints each negative 25c. SKRUDLAND, 4118-26 Overhill, Chicago.

ROLLS DEVELOPED—Two Beautiful Double Weight Professional Enlargements, 8 Neverfade Prints, 25c. Century Photo Service, LaCrosse, Wis.

Help Wanted—Instruction

FOREST JOBS AVAILABLE $125-$175 MONTH. Cabin, hunt, trap, patrol. Qualify immediately. Write Rayson Service, C-62, Denver, Colo.

LEARN BARTENDING BY MAIL. Professional mixers earn big money, travel everywhere. Free booklet. BARTENDERS INSTITUTE, 20 Clinton Street, Brooklyn, New York.

Advertisers

This space is available for legitimate advertisers who are looking for profits at low cost. Write for rates to: Department F, Popular Publications, 205 East 42nd Street, New York.

U. S. Stamps Wanted

CASH for unused U. S. Stamps at 90% face value. Plymouth, 152 West 42nd St., New York.

Poem—Songwriters

Songwriters: Interesting Proposition. Write: PARAMOUNT SONG-RECORDING STUDIO, L-13, Box 190, Hollywood, Calif.

SONG POEMS WANTED—any subject. Send best poem today for offer. RICHARD BROS., 30 Woods Bldg., Chicago.

SONGWRITERS: Send for Free Rhyming Dictionary and Writers' Guide. MMM Publishers, 636 Studio Bldg., Portland, Ore.

SONG POEMS WANTED TO BE SET TO MUSIC. Free examination. Send poems to McNeil, Bachelor of Music, 4153 A South Van Ness, Los Angeles, Calif.

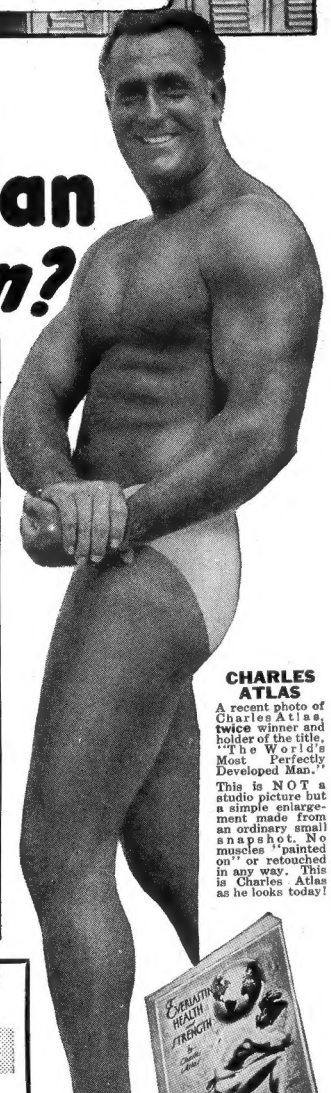
Patents

INVENTORS—Write for New Free Book, "Patent Guide for the Inventor" and "Record of Invention" form. No charge for preliminary information. Clarence A. O'Brien and Hyman Berman, Registered Patent Attorneys, 16-D Adams Building, Washington, D. C.

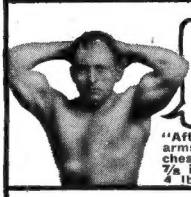
Headliners All!

Stars of the diamond, the gridiron—plus stories by headline writers. That's what you'll find when you read DIME SPORTS MAGAZINE.

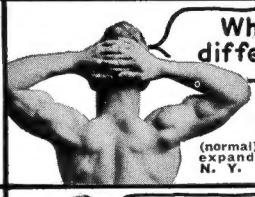
Will You Give Me 7 Days to PROVE I Can Make YOU a *New Man?*



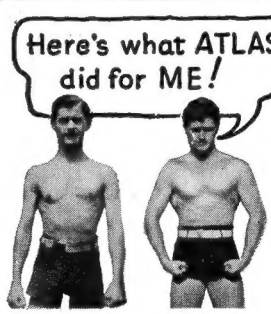
LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE



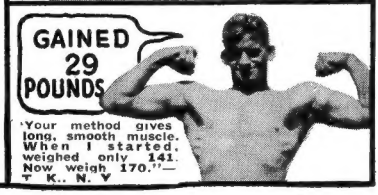
"After ONE WEEK my arms increased 1½ in., chest 2½ in., forearm ⅞ in., and I have gained 4 lbs."—C. S. W., Va.



"Started a week ago. Have put 3½ in. on chest (normal) and 2½ in. expanded."—F. S., N. Y.



"Am sending snapshot of wonderful progress. Certainly recommend you for quick results!"—W. G., N. J.



"Your method gives long, smooth muscle. When I started, weighed only 141. Now weigh 170."—T. K., N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS
A recent photo of Charles Atlas, **twice** winner and holder of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." This is NOT a studio picture but a simple enlargement made from an ordinary small snapshot. No muscles "painted on" or retouched in any way. This is Charles Atlas as he looks today!

7-Day TRIAL OFFER

I could fill this whole magazine with enthusiastic reports from OTHERS. But what you want to know is—"What can Charles Atlas do for ME?"

Find out—at my risk! Right in first 7 days I'll start to PROVE I can turn YOU into a man of might and muscle. And it will be the kind of PROOF you (and anyone else) can SEE, FEEL, MEASURE with a tape!

My FREE BOOK tells about my amazing 7-DAY TRIAL OFFER—an offer no other instructor as ever DARED make! If YOU want smashing strength, big muscles, glowing health—I'll show you results QUICK!

Sterling Silver Cup Being Given Away
This valuable cup, of solid sterling silver, stands about 14 inches high on a black mahogany base. I will award it, engraved, to my pupil who makes the most improvement in his development within the next three months.

FREE BOOK

I myself was once a 97-pound weakling—sickly, half-alive. Then I discovered "Dynamic Tension." And I twice won—against all comers—the title, "The World's Perfectly Developed Man"!

I have no use for apparatus. "Dynamic Tension" ALONE (**right in your own home**) will start new inches of massive power pushing out your chest—build up your shoulders to champion huskiness—put regular mountains of muscle on your biceps—free you of constipation, pimples—make those stomach muscles of yours hard ridges!

Make me PROVE it! Gamble a postage stamp. Send coupon for my **FREE BOOK AT ONCE!** Address me personally: **Charles Atlas, Dept. 83X, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.**

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 83X,
115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

I want proof that DYNAMIC TENSION will make a new man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, "**Everlasting Health and Strength.**"

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

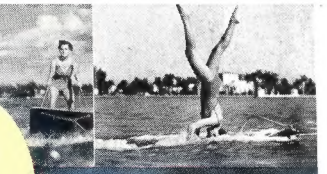
Address .....

City..... State.....

fun?

SURE IT IS

—and mighty strenuous too!



"SPORT, even for the fun of it, can be tense and tiring," says Miss Gloria Wheeden, who is shown aquaplaning above and at left. "Like most of the folks who go in for water sports, I pride myself on my physical condition. Yes, I smoke. When I feel a bit let-down, I light up a Camel and get a 'lift' in energy." When an active day drains physical and nervous energy, Camels help you renew your flow of vim. And being mild, they never get on your nerves.

"MANY A TIME I've smoked a Camel to get a 'lift,'" says Harry Burmester printer, *{left}*. "With Camels handy, I feel I can take the tough spots right in stride. Camels never tire my taste or irritate my throat—even smoking as much as I do."

Copyright, 1937,
R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company
Winston-Salem, N. C.

COSTLIER TOBACCOS

Camels are made from finer, MORE EXPENSIVE TOBACCOS—Turkish and Domestic—than any other popular brand.

1060 PARACHUTE JUMPS—no mishaps! Floyd Stimson *{right}* started smoking Camels at his first parachute jump. "Camels are so mild I take healthy nerves for granted," says Floyd. "I've found what I want in Camels. Mildness — tastiness."

Get a Lift with a Camel!